

PERFORMATIVE SOVEREIGNTY: STATE FORMATION IN THE  
TRANSNISTRIAN MOLDOVAN REPUBLIC

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# PERFORMATIVE SOVEREIGNTY: STATE FORMATION IN THE TRANSNISTRIAN MOLDOVAN REPUBLIC

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This dissertation explores sovereignty and statehood in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (PMR), a *de facto* state located in eastern Moldova. Unrecognized for more than two decades, this project explores how non-recognition modifies our understanding of sovereignty. An ethnographic investigation of sovereignty and statehood in an unrecognized polity, this dissertation takes sovereignty and its performances as its central theme not by interrogating axiologically whether the PMR fulfills some or all of the criteria of a sovereign state, whether or not sovereignty is a relevant concept for political authority in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or whether the PMR has a right to exist under international law. The context of non-recognition that gives rise to these performances of sovereignty constitutes this dissertation's central operating principle. The domains in which these performances occur become zones for contending with questions about the role of the state and the fate of a people unmoored from the utopian project that provided a sense of belonging and provided for them materially. The sovereign performances provided a means for public and private negotiations of these and other fundamental questions. This study is intended as a contribution to the growing literature on post-socialist sovereignty and political economy, as well as new developments in the social sciences and the humanities that look to the role of images and perceptions in political practice.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michael Stephen Bobick was born on November 24, 1979 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He grew up outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and later lived in Munich, Germany as an undergraduate a student and later in Chicago, Illinois. Michael arrived at Cornell University in 2005 to pursue doctoral studies in sociocultural anthropology that would take him to the Republic of Moldova for fieldwork between 2008 and 2009.

This work is dedicated to my family, whose unconditional love and support made it possible. My parents instilled a lifelong love of learning that I carry with me today. My wife Tanya deserves special recognition for all that she does to make my life as an academic possible – I most want to thank her for all of her love, sacrifice, and kind indulgence. The newest member of our family, Daria, has played a larger than expected role in this dissertation. She was the initial impetus to bring this seemingly endless task to completion. I would like to sincerely thank her for inspiring and amazing me everyday

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
FPM	Popular Front of Moldova [ <i>Frontul Popular din Moldova</i> ]
MASSR	Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
MSSR	Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
OSTK	United Council of Work Collectives
PMR	Transnistrian Moldovan Republic [ <i>Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika</i> ]
PMSSR	Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic [ <i>Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika</i> ]
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



## INTRODUCTION

The first time I tested my then-shaky knowledge of Russian could not have come at a worse time. I was taking a bus from Chişinău, Moldova, to Odessa, Ukraine in June 2006. At the time, I was beginning preliminary field research on Moldova and its separatist region, Transnistria. I had never actually been to Transnistria, though when the aging German bus stopped and everybody instinctively stood up, gathered their passports, and began to exit the bus, I knew I finally had arrived. As I exited the bus, I scanned the scene — a border guard in a green uniform was examining passports, cars stood motionless in lines while their drivers smoked, and stray dogs lazily roamed the grounds. As the only passenger with an American passport (everybody else was a citizen of Moldova, Ukraine, or Russia), I was told I needed to have my documents checked by the senior officer in charge. Inside a bare office that could not have been larger than one square meter, I handed my passport to a middle-aged officer of the Transnistrian Ministry of State Security (MGB). He asked me a series of question that focused primarily on why I needed to go to Transnistria and why I spoke Russian. Unable to persuade him that I really was going to Odessa, I confessed that I was “interested in Moldova.” This only heightened his curiosity, and after convincing him that, upon my return, I would sample the region’s famous cognac, he waved me by after recording my passport information in his black book.<sup>1</sup> As I stood in line with the rest of the passengers, I filled out a small form indicating my name, passport data, nationality, and purpose of visit, paid my fee of just under one dollar, and was back on the bus. My passport was not stamped, though I was required to keep my registration paper with my passport during my time in Transnistria.

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<sup>1</sup> The system for recording the passport information of foreigners has since been digitized. This occurred in early 2009 in order to modernize PMR border crossings.

Barely an hour later as we were leaving Transnistria, I was again shepherded by a border guard to a Transnistrian customs agent on the Ukrainian border. Unlike my first encounter, I could not persuade this particular officer to let me leave. His reasons were simple: I did not have an exit stamp from Moldova, and since I was transporting goods (my luggage), I needed a Transnistrian customs stamp. Obtaining these two items would be impossible: Moldova does not grant exit stamps along its eastern border, since it is not controlled by the Republic of Moldova; the latter was merely a ruse to lighten my wallet. I attempted to wear him down by waiting in plain view, one method for avoiding bribes. After twenty minutes, the bus driver grew anxious and was unwilling (or unable) to save me from this shakedown. I asked quietly if there was a “fine” I could pay, and he immediately asked whether I had dollars, Euros, or Moldovan lei. I ended up settling on a fine of about twenty dollars, which I reluctantly paid in order to be allowed the privilege of leaving.<sup>2</sup>

Crossing the Transnistrian border is a unique experience insofar as the border delineates a political entity that is not recognized by any other government as its own state. While a boundary maintained and regulated by force, in practice this border is an ill-defined line between competing sovereigns and their associated institutional forms and practices. Besides the formal registration procedures required to cross the border, one becomes immediately cognizant of being in a conflict zone. Tanks and machine gun nests dot the demilitarized zone on both the Moldovan and Transnistrian sides of the border. After crossing multiple times, however, one notices that this militarization of space serves a performative function. The bored Russian and Moldovan soldiers staffing the security checkpoints scarcely glance at the cars, buses, and pedestrians who briskly pass by — the only stop is the passport check on the Transnistrian side. Posted traffic signs are ignored, and in the summer these peacekeepers have even been rumored

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<sup>2</sup> The price of this “fine” was negotiated in dollars but paid for in Moldovan lei.

to strip down to their underwear to work on their tan.<sup>3</sup> Though perhaps a violation of the protocol, their jobs remain safe insofar as the conflict has been “frozen” and unresolved since Transnistria and Moldova signed a peace agreement in 1992.

Citizens of both Moldova and Transnistria have accepted this border and its peculiarities as objective facts — they follow its rules and submit to its inspections from both sides. Political elites on each side view these borders differently in terms of what authorities and jurisdictions they delineate. On the Moldovan side, a few customs agents who sit lazily and inspect passing vehicles staff the border. On most days, they sit outside at a small table and accept cold drinks purchased just up the road from drivers seeking their good grace in the hopes of avoiding inspection. Since the Republic of Moldova does not recognize Transnistria, these customs officers enforce Moldovan customs and immigration law from a place that officially constitutes neither an (inter)national border nor a normal stretch in the road. Moldovan officials regulate a transit point within a “security zone” that spans the eastern border Moldova shares with Transnistria. During one trip I encountered soldiers lazily guarding a bridge destroyed in 1992. Both the wider security zone and all of Transnistria lie within the recognized boundaries of the Republic of Moldova. As part of the peace agreement signed in 1992 between Transnistria, Russia, and Moldova, a contingent of around one thousand Russian troops are deployed in left-bank Moldova as peacekeeping forces.<sup>4</sup>

How one refers to this contested strip of land is complicated. Romanian-speakers refer to the separatist region of Moldova as *Transnistria*; to Russian-speakers it is *Pridnestrov’e*.<sup>5</sup> Others

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<sup>3</sup> This observation was pointed out by multiple people when we visited a popular summer resort area on the outskirts of Chişinău along the Dniester River.

<sup>4</sup> Russia’s position is odd insofar as it was both a party to the conflict (as the legal successor to the Soviet Union it was responsible for the former 14th Soviet Army that intervened on behalf of Transnistrian separatists).

<sup>5</sup> *Transnistria* is literally across or beyond the Nistru river, while the literal translation of the Russian *Pridnestrov’e* means at or near the Dniester. Though subtle, these toponyms are politically charged because of the languages they

seek to maintain a degree of neutrality and refer to the region as *Transdnister*. Transnistria is located within the Republic of Moldova's recognized borders east of the Dniester River. To the north, east and south Transnistria borders Ukraine. In Russian, the leadership of this unrecognized state official calls this territory the *Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublica* (PMR); in English, it is commonly referred to as the Dnestr Moldovan Republic (DMR). Less than thirty kilometers wide and covering 4,118 square kilometers (compared to 33,846 for Moldova, including Transnistria), the PMR is a *de facto* sovereign state that separated from Moldova in 1990. Estimates of the region's population range from official figures<sup>6</sup> of more than half a million (555,000) inhabitants to unofficial estimates<sup>7</sup> of less than four hundred thousand (370,000); Moldovans (31.9%), Russians (30.3%), and Ukrainians (28.8%) constitute the most populous nationalities.

Like any recognized state, the PMR forces those crossing its borders to become legible to the state bureaucracy and its representatives. At the border, officials input one's information manually into a centralized information system through a paper-based registration system. This is required of all individuals except for citizens of the PMR. The border is also a source of income for the state and its representatives. State institutions and positions with the state become sources of income (Humphrey 2004: 429), spaces where the state's authority is a commodity for sale. The PMR's borders serve as a means of collecting tribute in exchange for passage. As a polity with pretensions to statehood and recognition, the border is a space for the PMR to project authority and to force those who may not recognize the legitimacy of the PMR to acknowledge

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index and the perspectives they embody. The politically neutral labels of left and right-bank Moldova are occasionally used throughout this dissertation.

<sup>6</sup> "Preliminary Results Announced of the Transnistrian Census" ОГЛАШЕНЫ ПРЕДВАРИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ИТОГИ ПРИДНЕСТРОВСКОЙ ПЕРЕПИСИ НАСЕЛЕНИЯ <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol37-09-05.htm> Accessed September 10, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> "Genocide – Transnistria?" Геноцид по – приднестровски? In *Man and His Rights*, Человек и его права. No. 37(84). <http://dnestrnews.info/n37-84/597-genocid-po-pridnestrovski.html> Accessed November 8, 2010.

its existence, at least a momentary, in exchange for the right to enter or leave. These gestures, like any other mundane or everyday encounter with the state, can be symbolic, pecuniary, or communicative. By interacting with its institutions, the state is created and made salient to those engaging with it. Acknowledging PMR authority, even symbolically, challenges the region's contested status and constitutes a minor degree of recognition. When I first arrived in Moldova, I had to attend a required orientation program at the US Embassy in Chişinău. There, I was asked by a public affairs officer not to show my passport at the PMR border because the United States does not recognize the PMR as a state. Though aware that I would do otherwise, protocol dictated that he impart the official government line to me. Similarly, when I conducted one of my first interviews with the head of a Moldovan NGO and mentioned that I was interested in learning about sovereignty in Moldova, his response was that "Moldova is a sovereign state."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with the head of a Moldovan NGO located in Chişinău. The NGO is funded by an array of European and American democracy promotion organizations. In the 2009 parliamentary elections in Moldova, the organization led a pro-European, anti-communist advertising campaign.



**Fig 1.** The Republic of Moldova (King 2000: xxxii).

## ***De Facto Sovereignty***

The PMR controls a defined territory and projects authority within its borders. Despite having many of the attributes of a sovereign state, the region has been unrecognized since it separated from Moldova in 1990. As a polity that exists in a very visible gap on the political map of Europe, the PMR offers a unique opportunity to see how individuals live within a space that is geopolitically overdetermined yet which exists outside of any normative, regulated realm.

Constructed by the western media as a “black hole” in which corruption, smuggling, and criminality flourishes (Bobick 2011), Transnistria remains an object of contention between Moldova, a country wishing to join the European Union and reassert control over its *de jure* territory, and Russia, eager to (re)assert its influence across the Soviet space. By supporting the PMR, the Russian government preserves a means of continued influence in Moldova, a territory it (and the Soviet state) has ruled since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> As the Russian Federation becomes integrated into the world economy, its unofficial means of influencing its former possessions – through control of infrastructure, energy supplies, peacekeeping troops, and material and economic support for Kremlin-friendly leaders – constitute tangible mechanisms for creating and undermining authority in the post-Soviet world.

While a fundamental concept of international law, sovereignty in the former Soviet Union remains understudied.<sup>10</sup> As a revolutionary worker’s state under the control of the Communist Party, which served as the legitimating embodiment of the revolution, the Soviet state was not a bounded entity but was coextensive with the whole of the people (Buck-Morss 2002: 30). Those excluded from the polity were political or ideological opponents, not

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<sup>9</sup> From 1918 until 1940, Moldova was part of Greater Romania. For an overview of the social situation and relations between the Moldova and the centralized Romanian state, see Lizeveanu 2000, chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Notable exceptions include Bernstein 2010, Grant 2009, and Humphrey 2004. For recent reviews of the anthropology and archaeology of sovereignty, see Hansen and Stepputat 2006 and Smith 2011.

criminal.<sup>11</sup> While crime shades discussions of Transnistria, from the perspective of left-bank residents sovereignty oscillates between ideals — of economic prosperity, recognition, and internationalism — and a post-Soviet reality based around loss (Oushakine 2009). Residents paradoxically live in an area that is simultaneously both a “rogue” region and a nostalgic Soviet homeland, *rodina*.

As an entity claiming to be a sovereign state but lacking international recognition, the PMR raises a host of concerns related to the nature of sovereignty, nationalism, and the state. Since its secession from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR) in 1990 — recognized neither by authorities in Moscow or in Chişinău<sup>12</sup> — the PMR has existed as an international orphan, acting and claiming to be a state but remaining unrecognized as such.<sup>13</sup> Russia, the PMR’s primary sponsor and ally, refuses to recognize the PMR as a sovereign state. Russia has stipulated that any solution must maintain the territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova. Given repeated statements by the Russian Foreign Ministry stressing a need for any settlement to maintain Moldova’s territorial integrity, one can intimate that, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian Federation will not recognize the PMR.<sup>14</sup>

PMR state institutions include a bureaucracy; a tripartite government with legislative, executive, and judicial branches; a standing army; a police force; a territory delineated by state borders that it maintains, secures, and regulates; and a “national” economy with its own

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<sup>11</sup> This is reversal of Soviet revolutionaries borrowed who borrowed heavily from this criminal repertoire. For more on this, see Alexopoulos 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Chişinău was the capital of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, and today is the capital of the Republic of Moldova. It is common metonym for the Moldovan people and the Moldovan state.

<sup>13</sup> Transnistria declared its independence as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the PMR claimed full sovereignty and independence. Only Abkhazia and South Ossetia formally recognize the PMR.

<sup>14</sup> The origin of this conflict is complex, and chapter two offers some of the necessary background, including a historical overview of Transnistria and of the events that led to the region’s separation from Moldova in 1990. As a result of the peace agreement signed between Moldova, the PMR, and Russia in 1992, Russia maintains a small



currency, the Transnistrian ruble. The one, five, ten, and twenty-five ruble banknotes depict Alexander Suvorov, the Imperial Russian general. The fifty ruble note depicts the Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko; the hundred ruble note depicts the eighteenth century Moldovan prince Dmitrie Cantemir, and the five hundred ruble note depicts Catherine the Great, leader of the Russian Empire at the time of Tiraspol's founding by Alexander Suvorov. The reverse side of each banknote depicts important places and buildings in the PMR like factories, memorials, monasteries, cathedrals, and government buildings. Important to note with the symbology of the banknotes is their inclusion of historical characters from Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian history, an important gesture to the three largest nationalities in the region.



**Fig 2.** PMR rubles. Image courtesy of the Transnistrian Central Bank website.

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contingent in the PMR. The presence of Russian peacekeeping forces informally guarantee the region's continued existence and security, since any attack on the PMR would be considered an attack on Russia.

The PMR also has a functioning tax system, a central bank, and local and Russian banks that provide financial services.<sup>15</sup> The PMR issues a variety of documents, including birth certificates, passports, residency permits, marriage certificates, and *spravki*, ubiquitous certificates and attestations common in the former Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Though useless outside the region, a PMR passport is required to purchase a mobile phone, hook up utilities, obtain internal registration [*propiska*], enroll in school, receive healthcare, or register property transactions. This passport, like all other documents issued by the PMR, is not recognized outside its borders, though births and marriages in the PMR can be legalized in Moldova. Often, PMR citizens simply do not exist for the Republic of Moldova, given that many have only Russian passports and Soviet birth certificates.<sup>17</sup> When traveling abroad, residents must use the passports and documents of another state to be in compliance with the international system in which every person must have a passport issued by a recognized sovereign authority linked to a territory.<sup>18</sup>

The international system in which states exist is based on the mutual recognition of states as equals (Rée 1992). States (along with those movements that strive for statehood) implicitly

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<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued an advisory concerning financial transactions from the Transnistrian region: “Currently, the anti-money laundering laws of Moldova are not being enforced against banks operating within Transnistria because financial institutions within this specific region are not under the supervision of the Moldovan government.” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2011. “FinCEN Warns Financial Institutions On Transactions From Separatist Region in Moldova.”

<sup>16</sup> The Russian word *spravka* denotes any kind of certificate bearing a piece of information issued from an institution or individual that proves something: that one is not a criminal, healthy, never been married, etc.

<sup>17</sup> Transnistria's population travels internationally with "foreign" passports. The 2004 census gives a Transnistrian population of 550,000 (from 600,000 in 1989, though some claim it is now closer to 400,000. Moldovan passport holders make up between 200-300,000 (estimates range from 100,000 from Transnistrian officials to 400,000 by Moldovan officials. The Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration has issued 360,000 passports. Moldovan passports have been free for Transnistrian residents since 2006. Estimates of Russian passport holders range from a high of 140,000 to 100,000 from the Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration. The vast majority of ruling elites hold Russian passports (often multiple). Estimates of Ukrainian passport holders range from a high of 90,000 to a more likely number between 70-80,000. Data from AAASS roundtable on frozen conflicts, November 14th, 2009. Thanks to Lyndon Allin for this data.

<sup>18</sup> One notable exception to this is the travel documents issued by the United Nations in conflict zones. For more on the effort to issue UN-travel documents in Abkhazia, see Lyndon Allin n.d., “Citizens of Convenience? Russia’s Passportization of the Population of Abkhazia.”

have a teleology that ends with recognition.<sup>19</sup> Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh are curious polities insofar as they exist, have borders, provide services, and make wars despite the fact that the international community does not acknowledge them as recognized states. Despite this lack of recognition, they are real polities with real effects. The PMR, like other anomalies, challenges the idea that any given state or polity's authority — its unchallenged supremacy in a given territory — must be recognized (vetted) by an exterior presence like the United Nations.

What is the threshold for sovereignty? What happens to states or polities that project a durable (for lack of a better term) “stateness” but which are not acknowledged as states? Are they to be ignored, engaged, or catalogued as conceptual anomalies? With the PMR, one finds a situation whereby a small group of people elaborated a fundamental division that, in the context of a dissolving Soviet Union, allowed them to create a political community and a constituent people. PMR elites steadfastly believe that the state is deserving of international recognition, and residents have internalized this belief. This unrecognized state counts residents, registers their births, deaths, and marriages; it conscripts their sons, pays their pensions, and provides a sense of belonging. What happens when a group of people collectively acts as if they are a sovereign state? What occurs when *de facto* sovereignty successfully fends off *de jure* claims to sovereignty?<sup>20</sup>

Having all of the symbolic and institutional aspects that a state that should have, recognition aside, the PMR problematizes the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty. As the *de jure* sovereign, Moldova frames the issue in the language of international

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<sup>19</sup> It must be noted that some states, particularly multi-ethnic socialist states, have successfully divorced or have forsaken their earlier forms.

law: Moldovan territory is occupied by a foreign army that supports a separatist regime, since there is only one lawful sovereign.

Angew (2005) argues that conventional understandings of sovereignty as unlimited and indivisible rule over a territory and a people are in need of scrutiny.<sup>21</sup> As a conceptual form with fixed rights, attributes, and a subject position, the state is ontologically equivalent to an individual person in classical liberalism (Agnew 2005: 440). As a result, the state is treated as a given and remains rooted in a world of fixed boundaries and identities. Yet statehood, like personhood, is not pre-given; it arises out of interaction.<sup>22</sup> “Statehood results from mutual recognition among states. It is not the outcome of “isolated states” achieving statehood separately and then engaging with one another as abstract individuals.” (Agnew 2005: 440). Statehood, like personhood, can be multiply authored. Just as a person is a composite of the substances and actions of multiple individuals (Strathern 1988), a state too consists of multiple objects, forms, and relations received from other states or polities. States always emerge out of processes, but once a state is recognized, the processual aspects of statehood disappear in favor of an entity commonly viewed as fixed or ossified. International recognition reifies the state as an entity inhabiting a unitary subject position vis-à-vis international law. Only recognized states can confer claims to citizenship that are recognized by other states.<sup>23</sup> Despite claims of

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<sup>20</sup> Historically, the “marks” of modern sovereignty have included supremacy (no higher power), perpetuity (without temporal limit), decisionism (not bounded by or subject to law), absoluteness and completeness (sovereignty cannot be partial), non-transferability, and its exercise over a delimited jurisdiction (territoriality) (Brown 2010: 21-22).

<sup>21</sup> “Sovereignty is based on territoriality, the use of territory for political, social, and economic ends, is widely seen as a largely successful strategy for establishing the exclusive jurisdiction implied by state sovereignty” (Agnew 2005: 437).

<sup>22</sup> Statehood, like Melanesian personhood, can be multiply authored. Just as a person is, to paraphrase Strathern (1988), a composite of the substances and actions of others, a state or polity can consist of multiple objects, forms, and relations received from other states or polities. There is also an intermediary group, collective, or state level that is a subset of the larger phenomenon of statehood. Formal *de jure* recognition is but a gloss on these multiple forms and relations.

<sup>23</sup> This is similar to the situation with Russian citizenship in Abkhazia, where Abkhazian authorities resisted attempts by Georgia to confer Georgian citizenship on residents. The UN denied their requests for UN travel documents. In this context - having only Soviet-era travel documents and living in a Georgian state that considered

equality,<sup>24</sup> some states' claims to being sovereign are more likely to be recognized or, for that matter, respected, than others. For example, Moldova and Kyrgyzstan both have seats in the United Nations and are both formally recognized as sovereign states, yet the sovereignty of both is undermined by other states that in fact formally recognize them as sovereigns.

Despite being one of dominant spatial and organizational structure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, states today exist in a world in which the political map increasingly fails to reflect existing economic and social arrangements.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the PMR controls territory but lacks a recognized legal claim for it problematizes the link between power and territory. The modern territorial structure makes it difficult to conceptualize a geographic order that is not state-based (Murphy 1996: 83). While being a recognized state conveys tangible benefits, notably a seat in the United Nations and the opportunity to partake in international law, *de jure* sovereignty is an ideal, something rarely realized but which constitutes a kind of political "gold standard." Just as gold once served as a universal measure of value for much of the world's economy, only to be abandoned, why must *de jure* sovereignty be the norm when there exist so many challenges and exceptions to it?

This dissertation is concerned with how non-recognition modifies our understanding of sovereignty. While Agnew (2005) argues that *de jure* sovereignty is in fact irrelevant, it remains the foundation of an international system that, for better or worse, is a defining feature of modern life. An ethnographic investigation of sovereignty and statehood in an unrecognized polity, this

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them its *de jure* subjects but which took no steps to allow them to realize their right to travel outside of Abkhazia. In response to this, most acquired Russian citizenship. For more on this, see Allin, n.d. "Citizens of Convenience: Russia's Passportization of the Population of Abkhazia."

<sup>24</sup> Article two of the Charter of the United Nations states that "the Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all of its Members." *The Charter of the United Nations*. <http://www.un.org/en/documents/charter/chapter1.shtml> Accessed September 18, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> "The general acceptance of the current political-territorial order is a reflection of one particular and highly significant effect of the modern state system, that is, its role in shaping peoples' thinking about the geographical structure and organization of their world." (Murphy 1996: 82)

dissertation looks at how individuals negotiate this unsettled terrain, living in a state that provides a sense of order (law) and belonging but which, paradoxically, exists outside the purview of international law. Residents are subject to two contradictory forces: of a polity that is the sole provider of state benefits within its borders, and of an international system that does not recognize deviations from the norm. For residents, everyday existence as a political subject of an unrecognized state resembles an ongoing ritual vital to the internal functioning of the PMR that is unacknowledged and largely invisible to outsiders.

### **Sovereignty and Anthropology**

Though states, or, certainly, the people within them, aspire to sovereignty, it is more accurate to speak of sovereignty as a fiction that suffuses the internal and external relations of nation-states. With the PMR, one notices a visible tension between the traditional view of sovereignty as an indivisible condition and the actual dispersion of political and legal authority. Herein lies another paradox of modern sovereignty: while its form has proliferated insofar as it remains the foundation of the international system, sovereignty's unimpeachable foundations are weakened by transnational flows of capital, people, goods, and violence. Everyone *wants* sovereignty because it is a condition for joining the realm of nations, yet exactly what sovereignty is in the twenty-first century is open to debate.

In anthropology, there has been a focus on bodies as the locus of sovereign power.<sup>26</sup> Early conceptions of sovereignty placed the sovereign (usually a monarch) in familial relation to his political subjects. The term sovereignty encompasses at least two distinct forms: the

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<sup>26</sup> For an overview on sovereignty in anthropology, see Hansen and Stepputat. "Sovereignty Revisited," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 295-315. For more on bodies and sovereignty, see Grant 2009; Hansen & Stepputat, eds. 2005. For a discussion of sovereignty as a national ritual, see Fiskesjö 2003, 2010.

premodern sovereignty of kings, monarchs, and absolute rulers and the modern, modern, international system of sovereign states that can be traced to the Peace of Westphalia. Foucault (2003) viewed sovereignty largely as a pre-modern form of political power staked on a homology between the body of the monarch and the body politic, in contrast to modern forms of biopolitics that inscribe authority directly on the physical bodies of subjects.<sup>27</sup> Agamben (1998: 6) implicates bodies further, arguing that the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the nucleus of sovereign power. Modern techniques of authorization and technologies of subjection that draw “bare life” into the political sphere represent “the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben 1998: 6). For Agamben, sovereign power is premised on the capacity to decide on life and death, the capacity to visit excessive violence on those declared enemies or banished from the political community as undesirables.<sup>28</sup> Sovereign power operates through the “state of exception”—the suspension of rules and conventions that creates a zero-point from where the law, the norms, and the political order can be constituted.<sup>29</sup> This focus on the exception is based on Schmitt’s dictum that the “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (2005:5). In the PMR, sovereignty is not premised on a single decision or set of decisions by an individual; it is the domain of a political community and those actors that can legitimately claim to speak for it.

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<sup>27</sup> In his essay “Governmentality,” Foucault illustrates how sovereign power in the modern world operates through “a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security.” (1991: 93). Foucault’s most famous disciplinary form, Bentham’s panopticon, became the basis for disciplinary power in factories, hospitals, and schools. As an instrument of modern discipline, it came to replace pre-modern sovereignty as the fundamental power relation. Foucault misses the relation between modern capitalism (and its property division of the globe) and sovereignty.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben’s *homo sacer* (1998) and the state of exception (2005) are but a means of constructing an analytics of power over sovereignty as a limit concept, since sovereignty signifies both the political power constituting the law as well as the law restraining that very power. In his earlier work, Agamben does not emphasize how would-be sovereigns perform it, but this is the main topic of Agamben’s more recent book *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011).

<sup>29</sup> In anthropology one must note how the state of exception has become the norm. Its popularity as an analytical framework for approaching “sovereignty” leads to, paradoxically, the ubiquity of the exception. How widespread must the exception be for it to cease being exceptional?

Anthropological approaches to sovereignty look not to formal political orders but instead to the “tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state” (Hansen & Stepputat 2006: 297). Though grounded in violence, the PMR’s *de facto* sovereignty is a performance designed to achieve certain goals. This idea of sovereignty as performance remains connected with more formal presentations of sovereignty both at the level of the state and the individual. Despite Hansen and Stepputat’s dismissal of the formal realm, formal arrangements remain important insofar as they relate to the everyday exercise of sovereignty. For example, as ideology, abstract concepts like the nation-state, the monarchy, or homeland are naturalized for subjects and citizens. In becoming “the way things are,” these formal political orders must be analyzed together with the ethnographic evidence that clarifies what they mean for people and how they are manipulated by elites. For example, one can view the traditional Soviet victory parade both as the state’s presentation of its military might to its citizens and the world while at the same providing an opportunity for citizen to place themselves within the state’s experiential and imaginary awe. Similarly, Cattelino argues that sovereignty not something possessed, but rather a condition of interaction (2008: 190). Humphrey argues that anthropological approaches to sovereignty draw attention to the “actualities of relations” (2004: 420) that ground any such association.<sup>30</sup> Post-socialist sovereignty is constituted in a vast array of places, objects and practices that mediate practices of authorization and subjection.

The PMR formally presents itself to its constituents and to its critics as a sovereign state. It has all of the pageantry of a state, including an anthem, emblem, symbols, flag, currency, and

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<sup>30</sup> “When sovereignty is identified within a particular configuration, then sovereignty itself, which has to consist of practices, may be rethought not simply as a set of political capacities but as a formation in society that engages with ways of life that have temporality and their own characteristic aesthetics” (Humphrey 2004: 421).



historiography, among other things.<sup>31</sup> When PMR representatives meet with other state representatives, they act as equals and present themselves as such. Officials from the Republic of Moldova and Western diplomats refuse to show their passports on the PMR border, as showing their diplomatic passport would in fact constitute recognition of PMR authority. When I began my field research under the auspices of a fellowship administered by the US Embassy in Moldova, I was asked not to show my passport on the border and instead show my Moldovan identity card. These diplomatic rituals occur amidst a more generalized sense of liminality.

### **Liminality-at-Large: States, Ritual Subjects, Structures**

Ritual is transformative, a process of leaving one social position and embodying another.<sup>32</sup> During the liminal period, ritual subjects are structurally, if not physically, “invisible” (Turner 1967: 95). Liminality is concerned “with the essentially unstructured (which is at once destructured and prestructured)” (Turner 1967: 98). Ritual subjects lack a position in what Turner calls the “politico-jural structure” (1967: 99). The rituals and *rites de passage* described by Turner end in aggregation whereby the transitional being is reincorporated into society: the not-boy-not-man becomes a man, the initiates become full members of society.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The flag of the PMR is in fact the flag of Soviet Moldova, the MSSR. Similarly, its state emblem is the emblem of the MSSR too.

<sup>32</sup> Turner takes the liminal period as a formative process that imparts the traditions (and knowledge) of society. In the liminality, neophytes are an unnamed (undifferentiated) yet essential social body; essential in that they insure the continuity of the social system yet unnamed because of their structural ambiguity. Although neophytes lack symbolic status (unnamed, unmarked, and undifferentiated), they are symbolically separated vis-à-vis other members of the community.

<sup>33</sup> Following Van Gennep (1961), Victor Turner described *rites de passage* as “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.” These rites of passage, “transitions,” are marked by three phases: separation, margin (limen), and aggregation. In the first phase, the individual or group is detached from an earlier fixed position in the given social structure. In the second phase, there is a pervasive liminality — the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous insofar as the participant has few or none of the attributes of the previous or future state; the subject is, in a very real sense, unbound by the ritual process. The third phase, aggregation, is the consummation of the passage whereby the individual is reincorporated in the social, into society. Turner’s writings constitute some of the canonical texts of symbolic and interpretive anthropology and remain widely cited both within and outside the discipline.

Non-recognition is akin to a kind of liminality-at-large. The uncertainty in which residents live is akin to an unending ritual whose periodic re-affirmations and performances of sovereignty never achieve their ultimate goal. When one thinks about sovereignty in the context of liminality, a recurring structure emerges whereby sovereignty is performed as ritual. This performative sovereignty requires involvement, acting out — some sort of embodiment or acknowledgement, but by its very nature it can never be decisively established.<sup>34</sup> The PMR's failure to simply "be" sovereign as opposed to performing it leads to situation in which the PMR cannot be associated with any recognized state of existence and instead remains mired in an uncertain, liminal state. This failure constitutes a structural deferral of sorts, an unending ritual that remains generative despite its failure. The PMR is structurally invisible and polluting, an unrecognized polity that poses a threat to international security.<sup>35</sup> The PMR generates effects that cannot be reduced or conjured away. As this dissertation shows through a variety of ethnographic and historical examples, liminality-at-large and its associated performative sovereignty remain generative of a host of institutions, communities, narratives, rents, and subject positions. Throughout this dissertation, I will show how this performative sovereignty cannot be finalized and/or anchored in any institution and as a result must be re-staged over and over again.

Transnistria's liminality-at-large exemplifies the structural liminality of the post-Soviet condition insofar as both the PMR and the post-Soviet subject (previously defined in relation to the collective and the socialist state) both lack a clear subject position. PMR citizens do not see themselves in the context of the Moldovan nation, just as similarly two decades ago Soviet citizens awoke to find that Soviet power no longer existed and the socialist project was quickly and thoroughly replaced by a capitalist system that was its antithesis. For individuals, this lack of

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<sup>34</sup> For more on performativity and politics, see Butler 1997.

a fixed subject position is reflected in the trope of disorder, *bespredel*, a lack of any visible obstacles or limits that also denotes an absence of shared rules or laws. Residents are left with participation and traumatic memories of the 1992 conflict with Moldova as the experience that provides the liminal subject with the means to navigate an otherwise disorienting post-Soviet landscape. The former offers a phenomenological way to apprehend politics and, as described below, state formation, while the latter uses the images of the violated corpse as the basis for creating a political community marked by victimhood. Since PMR citizens reside within Moldova's recognized borders, they are ostensibly subject to Moldovan law and protections. Due to the PMR's success in limiting sovereign competitors, Moldova is unable to assert control over the region. To create the constituent holders of sovereignty, the people [*narod*], the PMR developed its own local democracy practiced through the institution of the referendum.<sup>36</sup> Referenda offer residents a means of participating in the affairs of state.<sup>37</sup> Mass participation allows the PMR to offer up a visible form of democracy to challenge the norms of democracy as imagined by the West.<sup>38</sup>

PMR historiography elaborates a narrative of victimization that is overcome only through the establishment of a state. The 1992 war with Moldova is a collective trauma internalized by the population and repeated in a variety of settings — state holidays and historiography/civic

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<sup>35</sup> For more about Transnistria and the issue of international security, see Bobick 2011, Galeotti 2004, Kliment 2005, and Sanchez 2009.

<sup>36</sup> The word *narod* is typically translated as people, typically understood to be an ethnos or nation bearing a common language, culture, territory, religion, and history. This is Stalin's standard definition of the nation. The Transnistrian *narod* is closer to the *sovetskii narod*, the Soviet people. In his speech at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, Khrushchev declared that the Soviet *narod* had been formed. The Soviet *narod* were a mix of the old and new, of nations and peoples tempered by internationalism. The Soviet *narod* were a new historical, social, and international community of people having a common territory, economy, and socialist content; a culture that reflected and preserved the particularities of its constituent nationalities; and a common federal state. Above all, the Soviet *narod* shared a common goal: the construction of communism.

<sup>37</sup> Referenda are supplemented by other means of civic participation such as elections and public holidays.

<sup>38</sup> This fear of the West remains something of a historical position in the Russian cultural area and figures into the eternal debate over whether Russia is or is not European. Most recently, this has taken the form of Eurasianism. For more on Eurasianism as a contemporary intellectual movement, see Laruelle 2008.

education being the most prominent examples. The violated corpses of those who perished died in armed conflict with Moldova serve as a corporeal base upon which to differentiate the region's internationalist populace vis-à-vis Moldova, the logic being that we are different, and these bodies prove it — the *narod* has been the victim of a primordial crime of aggression by Moldovan nationalists, with Romanian support. This intrusion of nationalism into a peaceful, productive internationalist region fundamentally differentiated left-bank Moldova (Transnistria) from the rest of Moldova. PMR elites reap significant benefits by citing this aggression as an ongoing mandate for the PMR's existence — above all, the state protects its citizens. The PMR's lack of recognition is profitable to both locals and outsiders, allowing access to rents and monopolies that have led to the region being referred to as the “black hole” of Europe, a zone of criminality (Galeotti 2004).

### **Ritual, Power, and Inequality**

The aforementioned discussion of ritual and sovereignty is largely silent on the issues of power and inequality. One must remember, however, that Turner was concerned above all with the role of ritual as it relates to the community, itself affirmed and renewed through ritual. Despite pronouncements of unity, equality remains a myth. While the performances of sovereignty outlined above affirm the PMR as a community, discrepancies remain. These rituals reaffirm, re-establish, and set up these inequalities. By focusing singularly on performance of statehood, these rituals constitute economic inequality in the region, for to focus on any particular (e.g., on the needs of a particular subset of the population) at the expense of the general (the region's quest for international recognition) would demolish the appearances of unity required by the PMR's internationalist ethos.

Political rituals and performative sovereignty sanctify the existing order. Framing its longstanding quest for international recognition in collective terms creates a situation whereby individuals largely cannot object to the state. The obvious parallel with political rituals and performances can be found in the religious realm. The Russian Orthodox Church had an uneasy relationship with Soviet power which posited socialism as a secular religion. Now that this tension is gone, Orthodoxy can ascend to its rightful place as the default mode of existence.<sup>39</sup> The Orthodox Church's ascendant social position was foreclosed by the existence of the Communist Party.

Similarly, in the realm of secular authority, the PMR emerged as a corrective in response to the abuses of Soviet power and the threat of nationalism. This was described to me on multiple occasions as communism without the party. Once the tension between the moral universe of the Soviet people [*sovetskii narod*] and the party bureaucracy disappeared, people could embrace the former category unproblematically. This shift preserved the ideals and symbolic universe of the Soviet Union but left the practical instruments of governance and authority open to manipulation, since there was no clear break between the Soviet state and an independent nation. Individuals could embrace the symbolic and practical aspects of PMR life that appeared to be Soviet — the multinational identity, Soviet nationality categories, the rhetorical invocation of the *narod* as the holders of popular — but withhold any moral or ethical judgment on the PMR state and its officials due to unresolved political questions. This eternal uncertainty and liminality allow for performances and rituals to become the primary means of political engagement. Participation, both active and passive, allows these rituals to constitute and gloss over the inequality between those in power and those who are not, between the rich and the poor. As a whole, these state rituals and the larger performance of sovereignty legitimize the PMR.

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<sup>39</sup> This mode of existence is the main subject of Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

## A Brief Note on Sovereignty and Performance

The exercise of sovereign power has always been a performance, though it is a performance backed by violence or the threat of it. Since its premodern forms in which the king or monarch existed as a presence over and above his subjects, with the actual exercise of sovereignty what we find is a mass of individuals who, through the threat of violence (actual, symbolic, or divine) accept the authority of the monarch, and, later, the state.<sup>40</sup> Though this subjection may have been violent, the sovereign's authority came to be adorned with symbolic and religious rituals that sanctify, reify, and reproduce the social order in which the sovereign exists above his subjects. Similarly, with the PMR, state power is constituted through rituals, both mundane and grandiose. The *narod* exist and are active in politics to the extent that they serve the state and those who profit from it, both literally (chapters two and five) and figuratively (chapter three).

Just as Marx noted that each mode of production contains elements of its predecessors, our political system too contains traces of past rituals and practices. To get a sense of the modern analogues that stress the importance of the ritual performance of sovereignty, one need only look to the ritual pardoning of a Thanksgiving turkey in the United States (Fiskesjö 2003, 2010). In this somewhat bizarre ritual, the President visibly “pardons” a turkey and spares it from the Thanksgiving table. In actuality this ritual is a fruits sacrifice in which the leader symbolically refrains from consuming a token sample in order to open the way for mass consumption. This ritual, as part of the whole set of rituals which forms “Thanksgiving,” effectively recreates and reaffirms citizens as members of a common tribe, with the Commander-in-Chief serving as the leader charged with channeling divine forces for the common good (Fiskesjö 2010: 13).

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<sup>40</sup> Rooted in divine law and natural law, the sovereign exists above positive law, all law made by humans.

Similarly, the issue of how the British monarch relates to the City of London offers an example of how trade and commerce dictate to the ostensible sovereign of the land. The City of London is a privately owned corporation masquerading as a state that is in fact not part of England or the United Kingdom. Her majesty and the Prime Minister are symbolically and fiscally subordinate to the Crown (the governing board of the City) and the City's Lord Mayor, given that the City is the financial engine of the United Kingdom. Before the Queen enters the City, she must bow and ask permission to enter this private, sovereign state.<sup>41</sup> The Lord Mayor, dressed in full regalia, meets the Queen at the City's borders. Noteworthy is the fact that the Queen and her handlers must be in plainclothes. Though this ritual has historical origins, the idea that economic interests symbolically dictate to the constitutional monarch show how performances and rituals of sovereignty clarify the underlying structures of political authority and in the process illustrate the material interests that come to undermine this authority and its presentations. Just as the City of London exists fully within the recognized borders of the United Kingdom and acts as if it is separate, despite its obvious physical contiguity, the PMR acts as if it is not part of Moldova and requires visitors and those crossing its borders to show the proper symbolic deferral to its authority. While the City of London and the rest of the United Kingdom are economically integrated to the point that the City's existence is largely invisible, save for the occasional royal visit, the economies of Moldova and the PMR are separate and operated under different laws and use different currencies.

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<sup>41</sup> *Halsbury's Laws of England* says this about the relationship between the Lord Mayor of the City of London (not the Mayor of Greater London) and the Queen: "By ancient custom the Lord Mayor tenders the City Sword to the Sovereign when she enters the City on state occasions, in token acknowledgement of her overriding authority. The Sovereign touches the sword and, by that gesture, returns it to the Lord Mayor with implied permission to carry it before her whilst she is in the City. Also by ancient custom the permission of the Lord Mayor is sought for the passage of troops through the City, and he receives quarterly, under the Sovereign's sign manual, the password of the Tower of London. As spokesman for the citizens, he is entitled to the right of special access to the Sovereign." <http://ask.metafilter.com/94476/Is-the-British-Queen-regnantreigning-King-allowed-into-the-City-of-London> Accessed April 25, 2012.

## The Subject(s) of Post-Socialist Sovereignty

Recognition requires another entity, an Other, since by its nature recognition implies communication, exchange, or acknowledgement. International recognition is an act of communication that is about everything *but* supremacy in a given territory, enmeshed as the process is in the messy realities of geopolitics, economic interests, and (inter)national egos. Recognition implies communication, but by definition a sovereign should simply “be” sovereign. Though one might observe, following Rée (2002) and Murphy (1996), that sovereignty today requires an international system to have any meaning, the international orphans<sup>42</sup> of the former socialist world show that sovereign-like entities do exist, and that their constituents believe in them despite their well-documented failings.<sup>43</sup> Despite state socialism ending in Eastern Europe more than two decades ago, states with varying degrees of recognition continue to emerge from the socialist world, the most recent being Kosovo, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Each of these states performs their sovereignty with varying degrees of success, and each shows how perceptions, performances, and beliefs play an outsized role in claims of sovereignty and recognition.

A state with limited recognition, Kosovo is only a viable polity because of western intervention against Serbian ethnic cleansing that legitimized a government described by the Council of Europe as being led by a Prime Minister who serves as the “boss” of a “mafia-like” group involved in heroin smuggling, organ smuggling, and other criminal activities.<sup>44</sup> A media-driven war with Serbia brought the plight of Kosovars to the television screens of millions,

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<sup>42</sup> To expand upon this extended familial metaphor, Transnistria remains an international orphan. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are in the process of being adopted, and Kosovo has successfully been adopted and its adoption as a sovereign state legalized under the tutelage of the United Nations, with the support of the United States.

<sup>43</sup> Within this frame, sovereignty becomes almost a natural right of sorts, the ideology of human rights applied to state-formation.



which generated support for an independent Kosovo — Kosovars needed a state to protect themselves. For Transnistrians, to see Kosovo receive international recognition is an indication of “double standards” that thwart the PMR quest for recognition. The suffering and ethnic cleansing wrought upon Kosovars (and its circulation in the media) led their collective voices to be heard. Subsequently, these claims were legitimated by the mechanisms of international law.<sup>45</sup> Despite the alleged criminal deeds of its leaders, Kosovo is a relatively successful example of international intervention.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, PMR elites look to the tortured, violated corpses of those killed during armed conflict in 1992 as necessitating a state. Photographs of the bodies of those killed serve as building blocks, connective tissues in service of a sovereign claims that will be recognized once the world realizes that Transnistrians too, have been victimized and require their own state for protection. Given the PMR’s lack of international support, these photos cannot translate into a claim for protection by an independent state. The repeated display of dead bodies signifies, implicitly at least, that these bodies (and losses they point to) are not yet symbolizable. These bodies are not symbolizable for residents, given that there is no available symbolic framework into which representations of dead bodies could be translated. These photographs are silent arguments, evoked when all other narrative tools fail. Ultimately, these photographs hark back to the idea of non-recognition, since recognition requires a shared symbolic vocabulary, a shared understanding about one’s positionality.

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<sup>44</sup> See “Inhuman treatment of people and illicit trafficking in human organs in Kosovo” <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/APFeaturesManager/defaultArtSiteView.asp?ID=964>

<sup>45</sup> The International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion on Kosovo declared that “the declaration of independence of the 17th of February 2008 did not violate general international law. The decision stated that the case of Kosovo was unique and did not set a precedent (as Russia has claimed). For the complete decision, see <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/141/15987.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> For more on Kosovo as a successful example of international recognition, see Mulaj 2008 and Wilton 2008. For a discussion of the illicit economy and international politics in Kosovo, see Strazzari 2008.

Sovereignty has turned into a commodity that can be bartered, bought, and sold. In the former Soviet Union, two new states emerged in 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Besides Russia, only Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Nauru's recognition was secured in exchange for an estimated \$50 million in Russian foreign aid, or more than \$5,200 per Nauruan.<sup>47</sup> With a negligible population, far-flung location, and destitute economy, Nauru traded perhaps the only thing it could: its ability to recognize other countries as sovereign.<sup>48</sup> With Abkhazia and South Ossetia, a series of conflicts with Georgia dating to the Soviet period allowed the Russian Federation to intervene and to recognize both.

With each of these examples, victimization becomes the basis for a sovereignty later confirmed through intervention and recognition. Though recognition creates a sense of finality, what precedes recognition is what authorizes it. With each of the aforementioned, staging a memorable performance was integral to being recognized as sovereign.<sup>49</sup> For the United States and its allies, Kosovo *is* a sovereign state, just as South Ossetia and Abkhazia are for Russia.

As a concept term, sovereignty contains a certain normative ideal that is self-policing — only recognized sovereigns can legitimately perform certain functions, and only recognized states can decide whether or not a polity is recognized as sovereign. Regardless as to whether these functions occur at the level of international relations or as a legal framework for American Indian rights claims, sovereignty is above all a recognized claim. This claim need not be solely political. Cattelino has argued that sovereignty is a worldview, not simply a legal and political

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<sup>47</sup> Nauru has a history of exchanging recognition for international aid. As a UN member it has oscillated between recognizing China and Taiwan at various times in exchange for development aid.

<sup>48</sup> Sergei Markedonov, the Director of the Department for Problems of Interethnic Relations at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, remarked cynically, "There is no question of morality here ... it's the smallest country in the world. It has no potential, just to trade in independence. Independence is a commodity – people will trade it." "Abkhazia is Recognized by Even Smaller Nauru" Ellen Barry, December 15, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/16/world/europe/16georgia.html>

status. The Seminole casinos studied by Cattelino are not simply moneymakers, but a means to reinforce Seminole sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness. Even recent biopolitical theorizations of sovereignty are premised on the marking of bodies by political authority (Agamben 1998, Foucault 2003, Hansen and Stepputat 2006). This tension between sovereign as a fixed, recognized claim and its inherent relativity mires the term in uncertainty.

Recognition as sovereign entity is the starting point for political science and international relations: one can act as a sovereign as long as one is perceived to be such. This is the political component to reader-response theory. Reader-response theory holds that it does not matter what the intention of the author is; what matters is how others read the text. Yet the PMR illustrates a different trend whereby intention matters (and may even come to be self-sufficient).<sup>50</sup> Acting or pretending as if the PMR is sovereign has proved to be a durable means of organizing the polity.

The successor states of the Soviet Union became independent long after the template of the nation-state was forged. Most obtained their current forms primarily because of socialist concerns, not national ones. Multi-ethnic socialist states used the nation as an organizational form, the goal being not to create independent nations but the constituent units of a socialist state that would transcend the nation.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, these national forms originally were created to drain the nation of its national content. With the demise of socialism, these states were left with the institutional forms bequeathed by socialism. Most declared sovereignty and were afforded all of the accoutrements of recognized states, the most important being a seat in the United Nations. With the emergence of these unrecognized successor states in the 1990s, the former socialist

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<sup>49</sup> The fact that I characterize these events as a performance is not intended to minimize those killed in these conflict zones. My argument is that these bodies and conflicts are real, as are the institutions, polities, sentiments, and subjectivities made possible by them.

<sup>50</sup> The recent examples of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya are negative examples of this insofar as they show how little sovereignty means when it ceases to be recognized.

world is, despite longstanding claims of deficiencies across the board, a laboratory containing novel forms of democracy, capitalism, and statehood.

### **On Narrative and Belonging**

Recent ethnography from the post-Soviet periphery (Oushakine 2009) illustrates how a state's failure to provide a coherent narrative can offer a means of belonging to communities that have experienced profound loss and disorder. From the PMR, the periphery of the periphery, the slightest acknowledgment (symbolic, financial, ideological) from Russia strengthens a durable sense of stability and belonging. After an initial decade of state building and consolidation, PMR political discourse is oriented around the idea that Russia will recognize the PMR, annex it, or otherwise support it in perpetuity. Locally, annexation remains popular because it forecloses the possibility of living under the Moldovan state. Though contradictory, annexation would enable locals to preserve their linguistic and cultural distinctiveness. These hopeful yet contradictory semiotics are inscribed on billboards, buildings, and in public spaces. These may appear in the form of banners that declare, "Wherever we stand, we stand with Russia" and "Our Strength is in Unity with Russia," or they may touch upon past revolutionary desires and fervor.

As I sat on a private bus headed to Tiraspol in 2006, my eyes were drawn to a large wall that prominently displayed the motto of the French Revolution in block Cyrillic characters: "Liberty, equality, fraternity!" In September 2010, as the PMR celebrated its twentieth anniversary, the font's once crisp outlines had visibly faded. These temporarily halted semiotics, weathered by time, were ignored yet remained a part of the symbolic landscape. This is but one

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<sup>51</sup> According to Lenin, nations emerged in response to the demands of capital. "The tendency of every national movement is towards the formation of national states, under which these requirements of modern capitalism are best satisfied" (Lenin 1975: 154).

example of how residents live amidst other symbolic remnants of the PMR's carefully cultivated revolutionary origins.

Over the course of two decades a profitable system has grown amidst this liminality. Today, the PMR has its own vested economic interests, a regional political class, legions of bureaucrats, and a veritable army of pensioners who benefit from the status quo. Some collect a paycheck or a pension, while others collect immense rents from the control of state institutions and bureaucratic fiefdoms. PMR elites have been successful in creating the accoutrements of a sovereign state and making integration with Moldova difficult.

### **The PMR as System**

The PMR state offers residents a sense of belonging that they would otherwise not feel in a Moldovan national state. At the material level, the region is a sinkhole for questionable capital accumulation that takes advantage of the region's lax regulatory and jurisdictional environment to enrich well-connected businessmen, both local and foreign. Russian investors own energy-intensive infrastructure like steel and electrical generation that consume the bulk of the region's gas, provided without the expectation of payment from Gazprom (estimated to be between 100 and 500 million dollars worth annually).

Russia provides humanitarian aid directly to the PMR President and Supreme Soviet without audit controls, though accounting controls were instituted in 2012. Though a visible part of this aid subsidizes pensioners, small businesses, orphans, and other charitable causes, one hears less in the media about how this aid is indirectly embezzled (destined for "business credits" and economic development). This functional role as a kind of near abroad money laundering hub allows a portion of this wealth to come back to private hands in Russia. Russian foreign aid,

profits from free natural gas, and revenue generated by local economic enterprises like Sheriff return to the Russian Federation in the form of kickbacks to Duma deputies (a cast of defenders of Transnistria from afar) who keep the region on the Russian political agenda. I myself have encountered more than one intoxicated Duma deputy in Tiraspol on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Day of the Republic [*den' respublika*].

The PMR is not a system in which everybody profits, but a system in which everybody believes that they profit. This profitability, real or symbolic, offers a means of enrichment for neighboring Ukraine and Moldova. As a means of illustrating how profit trumps all else, I give the following examples. One ethnic Moldovan I met in Chişinău spoke of a neighbor whose cousin, a Moldovan policeman from a town bordering the PMR, had purchased a cargo van to smuggle goods into Moldova from the PMR. Though it was unclear what he was transporting, the fact that a representative of the state that fought the PMR in armed conflict would profit from it only goes to show how the PMR's existence as a state remains predicated on maintaining a clear cut distinction between conflict parties, though in reality these parties are more similar than different. Similarly, when interviewing veterans of the 1992 conflict in both Moldova and in the PMR, both sides spoke of putting down their guns and drinking wine together in the evenings. The fact that each could put aside their differences after a hard day of fighting illustrates above all the power the political holds over us despite our common sense. While "politics" is cited as the reason this conflict remains unsolved, in actuality the conflict remains about control of the spoils of the Soviet state. To speak of the conflict as one between elites would be too simple, for if this line between conflict parties were to become blurred in the public imagination the state and its performances would cease to be felicitous.

This idea of a system that functions above the individual displaces blame and agency. Given the context of the (relatively) recent demise of the Soviet Union, an all-encompassing system that provided for its citizens from the cradle to the grave, the benefits of being part of a system far outweigh its negatives, even if the net result is impoverishment. In terms of the former, the PMR contains just enough of the detritus of Soviet life — its knowledge, categories, and practices — to draw attention away from its extractive aspects. Residents themselves cite the PMR's durability as a system alongside its claims to be a legitimate, if momentarily unrecognized, successor state to the Soviet Union.

One question lurking throughout this dissertation is the question of who exactly needs Transnistria to exist. The initial idealism of the state project was hijacked and today the state exists largely to enrich those at its helm. The dissertation begins with a series of referenda in the early 1990s that codified and annunciated the political demands of the left-bank populace and ends with an ethnographic excursion into a self-professed postmodern social movement. These examples were chosen because of the way they show how political performances shifted from sincere participation in uncertain times to a situation today in which individuals exercise little agency in the political process.

One informant active in the earliest state-building efforts told me that when the first PMR president's two sons arrived in the region in the late 1990s, everything changed. He described this as simple fiscal greed "father has a country," [*u papa est' stana*] the implication being that their arrival was an invitation to enrich themselves. This singular focus on extraction and impoverishment at the expense of sustainable economic development lessened the importance of the people as the constituent holders of sovereignty and increased their importance as passive individuals. As a population, residents today are required as the literal income-generating

material for enterprises like Sheriff (chapter four). As a result of this diminishing importance, the performativity that was the initial impetus for a separate state comes to be emptied of meaning. This itself begs the question why these performances continue? Why does Sheriff (chapter four) provide discounts for the elder? Why does a movement such as Proryv (chapter five) demand belief? Along the same lines, why is it necessary for people to appear to believe in a system where their actual belief is in fact unnecessary — why pretend? The short answer to these questions is that in the context of a post-Soviet existence that is precisely lacking any certainty<sup>52</sup>, people need to believe for themselves. This impetus to believe is tempered by a pragmatic tendency not to probe the particulars of how (and why) things are how they are. If one scratches the surface of this largely performative and participatory sovereignty, one may catch a glimpse of what everyone knows but nobody says: that the body politic is decaying. If one probes beneath the surface they will encounter decay and malaise — the shallowness of collective life will be exposed and the unitary *narod* will be vivisectioned into its decaying constituent parts, the individual nationalities that together constitute the PMR.

### **The (Post-)Soviet Past**

In the PMR, identification with the Soviet period is premised upon identities and subjectivities that emerged during postwar Soviet development.<sup>53</sup> During fieldwork, residents of both left- and right-bank Moldova spoke of Transnistria as a Soviet paradise. The region enjoyed

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<sup>52</sup> What was not altered by the fall of the Soviet state has been irreparably altered by the introduction of capitalist values.

<sup>53</sup> Particularly important for residents of left-bank Moldova was the fact that internal Soviet passports listed an individual's nationality. This was a particularly important point in the emergence of the region as an internationalist haven in a nationalizing Moldova.



a temperate climate, fertile soil, proximity to the Black sea, and unparalleled productivity.<sup>54</sup> Both in terms of subjective recollections and objective economic indicators, the region was incredibly productive, a place whose bounty was measured in the sweetness of its fruits and by its booming factories.

As a polity created explicitly in opposition to Moldovan nationalism, the PMR takes on national qualities due to the normative demands of statehood and nationhood in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Transnistrian citizen-subject is caught between the symbolic and semiotic legacy of the Soviet state and an unrecognized one that uses internationalism as a means to create national subjects. And while certain aspects of what made the region great still exist (e.g., its fertile soil), others have disappeared (its factories are largely shuttered). During interviews and everyday interactions, residents recalled the Soviet period as a time of plentitude and purpose — they belonged to a superpower. This contemporary lack is compensated for by a hyper-identification with the Soviet Union's legal successor, the Russian Federation. Residents' existence as subjects of a non-state connects them with a Soviet past from which they do not want to (and largely cannot) escape.<sup>55</sup> The requirement to remain visible forces residents to utilize the institutions, documents, and practices of a state that tried to liquidate their tenuous statehood.<sup>56</sup> This doubled citizenship, not duplicated but supplemented, only increases the burden placed on the performative aspects of sovereignty, since the PMR must show that the recognized supplement (passports, travel documents) remains secondary to the unrecognized core. I found that individuals fielded competing tenders for citizenship, with each offering its own benefits. This

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<sup>54</sup> Though left-bank Moldova included only 12% of Moldova's territory, it accounted for 33% of all industrial and 56% of all consumer goods produced in the MSSR. As a part of the military-industrial complex, its factories were not controlled by the MSSR in Chişinău, but were under the direct control of Moscow (Zabarah 2011: 161).

<sup>55</sup> I.e., this rootedness in past offers an existential comfort in addition to other more tangible material benefits. For example, PMR citizens receive monthly pension supplements from Russia. The Soviet past is also a necessity and vital resource for state -building insofar as in the PMR carries the banner of Soviet internationalism.

<sup>56</sup> This is applicable to the majority of residents who hold Moldovan citizenship. See footnote 18 above.

cleavage between politics and subjects animates the normative framework that prolongs this conflict.<sup>57</sup> The fact that everybody has two, possibly three, or even four passports offers the opportunity to act within competing (and often contradictory) political parameters. Liminality-at-large authorizes the uncertain subject to try on competing guises and masks (cf. Goffman 1959).

Over the course of fieldwork, I came to see that while in certain situations people would claim to care about recognition, later I would realize that many did not feel strongly about it. This fluidity is a result of the PMR's liminality whereby politics becomes a ritual without efficacy or any lasting effect.<sup>58</sup> PMR sovereignty is structurally akin to an empty set or an empty signifier, a placeholder with delimited boundaries (literally and symbolically policed by the PMR state) and set terms that afford flexibility. This performed sovereignty serves as a cover for certain things (e.g., economic plunder), but at the same time offers a compelling narrative when faced with capitulation.<sup>59</sup>

The unrealized teleology of the PMR demands public participation during holidays, academic conferences, state events, official negotiations, elections, and the like. Participation occurs in small, often unremarkable domains: domesticating the language of the state through the use of the possessive adjective form my state, [*moe gosudarstvo*], our state, [*nashe gosudarstvo*]; using the documents provided by the PMR state; or simply being at a public holiday or state-sponsored event. Alternately, performances of sovereignty can be grandiose, public spectacles

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<sup>57</sup> The international system's inflexibility and selective exceptions (e.g., Kosovo) have left places like Transnistria unacknowledged yet devoid of any durable framework for their current existence. This becomes an issue insofar as becoming "normal" or "resolving" the conflict is seen locally as negating its more than two decades as an independent polity.

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the most cited ethnographic example of the state as performance is Geertz's "theatre state" where "stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for" (Geertz 1980:13). The state served ritual: "mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual" (Geertz 1980: 13).

staged for foreign and domestic audiences. Others can be intimate and private — recounting a story of a fallen friend or comrade. Such performances seek to a liminality-at-large that cannot be pinned down or foreclosed.

I stumbled upon a performance one summer evening as I witnessed a group of local athletes receiving a blessing and an official send-off at the memorial complex in the center of Tiraspol. This group of sportsmen was about to embark on a trip to Russia for a martial arts competition. After a blessing by a local Orthodox priest, a high-ranking official from the PMR Ministry of Defense exhorted the youths to explain to Russians and others “what Transnistria is” — to communicate to the world that the PMR is. Ritually blessed by the sacred and encouraged by the secular, these athletes were sent forth to engage in public relations.<sup>60</sup> This performance indirectly acknowledged the PMR’s liminality-at-large and sought to overcome this uncertainty. While the PMR’s state-building project enjoys success among residents, the PMR’s reality must still be imparted to outsiders. Recognition requires a common vocabulary and a degree of shared understanding about each other’s positionality — it is this common ground that makes abstractions and translations between an apparent incommensurability possible.

### **The Orthodox Faith and the Post-Soviet State**

In Transnistria religious and ethical practices influence present social forms. In the post-Soviet period, the Orthodox Church emerged as a social and political force. This might appear odd, given that Soviet Union was the first state to have as an ideological objective the elimination of religion (Peris 1998), but Soviet attitudes and policies toward religion vacillated

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<sup>59</sup> Transnistria’s ongoing struggle with Moldova is framed with the same structure and historical content as the historic timeline of the Soviet state, beginning with the revolution and ending with victory in the Great Patriotic War.

<sup>60</sup> Their send-off was filmed and later shown on state television.

between a utopian determination to substitute secular rationalism for superstition and a pragmatic acceptance of religious practices and institutions. After seventy years of repression, Orthodox Christianity now constitutes a *de facto* state religion.

As an institution, the Russian Orthodox Church, like other religions, is in competition with other forms of authority like the family. This clash of authority pits religion against more traditional, parochial forms of knowledge. At the level of establishing worldly authority, one can view the witchcraft allegations in late medieval Europe not as a wider concern with persecuting witches but with the church and the state together breaking the authority of the family. Given that traditional beliefs and superstition passed through women, the church and state persecuted women under the guise of witchcraft allegations. As an institution that is thoroughly corrupt but exists beyond any discourse of corruption<sup>61</sup>, the Russia Orthodox Church provides an authorization as a subject of God that is both hierarchical and subject to a durable authority — the rule of the Elders that traces its authority to the time of Christ (Pelikan 1977). The Orthodox Church provides for its followers by giving them an identity as spiritual subjects when other secular identifications (citizenship, nationality) remain in question. Orthodox Christianity provides a structure that, given the absence of a stable subject position and a generalized lack of agency, confers a more stable sense of identity to those who identify with the Orthodox faith, even if their engagement is superficial at best.

The Russian word for Orthodoxy [*pravoslavie*] literally translates as right praising. As the *de facto* religion in the region, Orthodoxy is both a presence and a non-factor in terms of spurning engagement in the political realm. Its reemergence alongside two “foreign” ideas — capitalism and democracy — position it as a spiritual gloss on a material and political existence

premised on loss (of everything associated with the Soviet Union). Given this context, Orthodoxy provides a guarantee that the individual remains, at some level, important. This cannot be underestimated in a time when common values remain ill-defined. Religious spaces are open to all: they are places to gather, light candles, silently pray, or request prayers. The Russian Orthodox Church exists largely beyond the realm of formal politics, though it overlaps and remains part of the same circuits of authority and capital.

The PMR state-building project is framed as a secular, internationalist project with roots in the Soviet period, but the PMR state remains similar to the Russian Federation insofar as it legitimizes the state through Orthodox Christianity (in the PMR more than 95% of residents are Orthodox Christians). Religious power becomes another instrument deployed by the elite to sanctify the status quo. During public appearances a bishop or metropolitan in full regalia flanks the president, the head of the secular government. Authorities use religion to consolidate power by presenting Orthodox Christianity as the *de facto* state religion. Invoking the Orthodox Church as a constituent element of the region and its inhabitants strengthens the image of a singular, unitary people. The holders of popular sovereignty, the people [*narod*], are marked as Orthodox believers. Dissent and opposition are viewed through the frame of religious deviancy, since they threaten established customs. This instrumental use of religion can be traced to both pre-Soviet and Soviet-era practices.

Orthodox Christian practices permeated the Soviet institutions that formed the basis of Soviet society. One such institution was the collective. The collective was a social group organized around a place or activity (e.g. school, workplace, farm, club, or military organization); it was the fundamental social unit, and together collectives formed the skeleton of

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<sup>61</sup> One bishop in the PMR was a known pedophile and he remained in the good graces both of the diocese as well as the state. While people voiced these allegations with He received a promotion and now works for the Russian

Soviet society (Kharkhordin 1998: 958). This and other Soviet institutions were based upon long-established practices of the Orthodox Church. At the societal level, the Orthodox Church sought to not to coexist with the state or to dominate it, but for the secular world to dissolve into the church. This is analogous to Marx's communism in which the state would gradually wither away. In the Soviet Union, Marxism was akin to a secular religion that permeated the social fabric insofar as it purported to explain the logic and course of history.

In the Soviet Union the writings of Lenin and Stalin literally dictated the forms taken by the Soviet state. Similarly, in the Orthodox Church the authority of the elders determined the contours of belief. The Orthodox Church was concerned with three primary practices: denouncing sin, admonishing the flock into righteousness, and, when necessary, excommunicating. The Soviet state sought to control deviation from the official line through control and surveillance. The collective guided society, not a unitary, totalitarian power. Soviet schools, factories, offices, military regiments, and agricultural enterprises enforced discipline through word and deed (Kharkhordin 1999).

In Transnistria, these Soviet-era economic enterprises and collectives agitated for a separate state to protect their rights. These collectives, cut off from their Soviet foundation, were recalibrated according to new economic, political, and ethical imperatives. In Orthodox Christianity, salvation is a process of reestablishing man's communion with God. With the demise of Marxism, residents sought salvation through politics by constituting a state whose content is religious and its form secular. Today the Orthodox faith occupies different parts in people's lives, and its place within society remains unquestioned and unchallenged. This ascendant position sanctifies a unique merging of material and spiritual interests whereby

theological demands to revive a religion that above all defines the Russian cultural space overlap with economic pressures and charitable opportunities created by capitalism.

In the PMR religion provides a convenient cover for capital accumulation. A local company, Sheriff, mitigates its otherwise predatory economic position in the region through charity — religious charity provides a cover for economic plunder.<sup>62</sup> In the center of Tiraspol, the most prominent new Orthodox cathedral is the newly built Cathedral of the Birth of Christ. Located in the center of town only steps from the PMR Supreme Soviet, the cathedral was built with the financial support of the Sheriff holding company. During one interview with a local priest, I asked him whether this church really was the “Sheriff Cathedral,” as locals commonly refer it to. He responded by affirming that Sheriff did indeed help financially with construction, and that he did not see a problem with this: “long after Sheriff is gone, the cathedral will remain.”

The Orthodox Church and organized crime have much in common. In one documentary film, *Thieves by Law*, a prominent organized crime figure shows his collection of Andrei Rublev icons that he donated to the local Orthodox Church in Cannes, France. Those who have gained through criminal means turn to charity as a means of assuaging their often-predatory position in as gangsters or racketeers. Similarly, Varese (2005: 180-187) has described how the turn to religious charity by organized crime figures is a means of legitimizing ill-gotten gains both to God and to society. In one instance cited by Varese, the church utilized the same strategies of criminal racketeers to get monasteries and congregations to pay up. One Bishop in Yekaterinburg who resorted to harsh collection methods to shake down congregations rationalized his severe financial policies, explaining “money is the blood of the church” (Varese 2005: 186).

## A Note on the State

Throughout this dissertation, the PMR state plays an outsized role. From being the organizer of the performances of sovereignty to serving as the placeholder that temporarily assuages the liminality of non-recognition, the PMR state remains a central facet of life for residents. It is not my intention to reify the state as an actor, but to show how the state functions for a variety of constituencies.<sup>63</sup>

Who is the agent when one speaks of the PMR state? While there is a tendency to speak of a state that acts and makes decisions, the state often refers to certain people, in this case a small cadre of individuals directly involved in establishing the PMR. The most visible individuals exercising influence on the PMR state are its elected legislators and the PMR president and his family.<sup>64</sup> Less visible are the “power” ministries: the ministry of defense, the interior ministry, and the feared ministry of state security. Vested economic entities (both foreign and domestic) exercise undue influence over the state due to the external support they secure (namely a supply of cheap natural gas from Russia) that allows the PMR state to finance itself. It is thus difficult to speak of the state as a single actor. Instead, we must replace the state with those individuals or institutions that we are talking about. Yet one must not lose sight of the fact that the PMR state is not simply individuals, ideas, or institutions. While individuals occupy certain influential positions, no single individual determines its course.

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<sup>62</sup> The phenomenon of Sheriff is addressed in chapter four and Bobick 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Abrams (1988) famously declared that the state is an ideological project, not an agent: it is institutions, people, and interest that do not always agree with one another. The state is perpetuated by a minority (some) setting themselves up over others

<sup>64</sup> The minister I am alluding to is the head of the PMR Ministry of State Security (MGB), Vladimir Antuifeev. The PMR president Igor Smirnov’s two sons are intimately involved in business and politics. Smirnov’s younger son Oleg is chairman of the Transnistria branch of *Gazprombank*, a fully owned subsidiary of the state monopoly *Gazprom*, and his elder son Vladimir is the head of the PMR Customs service. Unofficial estimates of customs “revenue” reach as high as \$2 billion dollars a year, compared to an official PMR state budget of around \$150 million dollars.



In the PMR, the state generates immense profits for certain individuals and groups. The profitability of the status quo allows elites to use recognition for their own benefit insofar as they profess it vocally but profit from its antithesis. A large part of governance in the PMR is concerned with managing this ritual of (non-)recognition. Pro-PMR interests and their supporters in Moscow have successfully limited the influence of other competing sovereigns in the region. This allows for the PMR state, along with Sheriff, to be the sole provider of jobs, pensions, education, public services, utilities, protection, and property rights. In a system in which the state and a single holding company are the sole providers of benefits, change is viewed as threatening. As a set of institutions and as an idea with widespread salience among the populace, the PMR state capitalizes on subtle differences between Transnistria and Moldova to create identifications and knowledge that foreclose change or rapprochement. This implicit choice between an imperfect state that is “ours” and a Moldovan one creates an environment in which criticism of that state is unpatriotic.

### **Performing Sovereignty**

The PMR sheds light on practices that underlie any state but which are invisible when the state is seen as a recognized sovereign entity. Political theory focuses on sovereignty as supremacy, as the right to rule over others by force, custom, or law. Less attention is given to how sovereignty operates, to how a right to sovereignty comes to be recognized or, in this case, does not (Grant 2009: 1). Bartelson (1995) calls this the “givenness of sovereignty.” Transnistria illustrates how a self-authorized polity can, in the context of uncertainties created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, come to challenge the system of sovereign states. When recognition is

lacking, one must turn to other means of creating authority. The PMR illustrates how sovereignty has shifted to a concept based on performance.

Despite its stated goal of independence and international recognition, the PMR elite use recognition to distract attention away from policies that have plundered the region's once booming economy. A single local holding company, Sheriff, has monopolized the region's economy.<sup>65</sup> Sheriff became the dominant economic entity in the region because of its ability to exploit the PMR's murky regulator environment. For Sheriff and the PMR political class, the people are a resource to be exploited for gain. Despite mass impoverishment and obvious economic predation, state officials and elected representatives blame the region's problems on outsiders. Independence would force the PMR to diversify revenues to fund the state budget instead of the current arrangement in which the PMR finances its budget by reselling Russian natural gas, supplemented by local tax collection and Russian humanitarian aid.<sup>66</sup> Performing its sovereignty is important because the stalled teleology of the PMR requires it as a placeholder. Though those at the helm of the PMR state proclaim that the PMR is in fact sovereign, though without mass participation, their visible and well-known enrichment via the state will be even more visible. Likewise, local and foreign business interests need this participatory, performative sovereignty to keep Moldovan claims to the region at bay. Similarly, if there were no support among residents for statehood, the political separation from Moldova that has been so profitable for some would be increasingly untenable. As it stands now, with Russia serving as a guarantor of PMR security (due to the 1992 peace agreement), strategic investor, and donor, the region appears more independent than it would be without financial support from Russia.

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<sup>65</sup> Sheriff's transcription into Latin characters is *Sherif*, based on the Cyrillic word Шериф.

<sup>66</sup> The PMR's debt to *Gazprom* is today over two billion dollars. For more on Moldova and Transnistria's natural gas sector, see Bruce and Yafimava 2009.

As this dissertation will show, sovereignty is both performative and practical. Performing sovereignty to its constituents is just as important as keeping competitors at bay. Recent ethnographies (Lemon 2000; Pesmen 2000) have illustrated how performativity is notoriously difficult to institutionalize and is instead efficacious in the moment, in the here and now. Many of the phenomena described in this dissertation might appear at first glance to be only tangentially about sovereignty.

In terms of the economy, the PMR economy is based on a subjective component in which images of past productivity mask a predatory system in which the people are fodder for a system that ceaselessly realizes a profit. To maintain this facade, authorities highlight a few visible subsidies available to residents and contrast the region's economy with neighboring Moldova, Europe's poorest country. A single local holding company, Sheriff, has monopolized the regional economy while building a network of companies that provide vital services like television, internet, and fixed and mobile telephone service. For Sheriff, the people generate revenue and state institutions remain beholden for tax receipts and financing. Sheriff has created charitable programs to ensure that pensioners spend the bulk of their pension in its supermarkets — doing well is good for the bottom line.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, individuals can choose where to shop, though Sheriff supplies the goods they purchase.<sup>68</sup> Choice is an illusion insofar as the conditions of possibility in which residents live are managed and carefully calibrated. This captive consumer existence, along with the means of political participate described in chapter two, are but two instances in which the people constitute a required component of a larger spectacle and serve as the literal source of revenue. The people, residents — the collective origin of political power in the region — forms the basis for a polity that generates hundreds of millions of dollars not

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<sup>67</sup> This is a kind of post-Soviet Corporate Social Responsibility. For more on CSR as an object of ethnographic inquiry, see Welker 2009, and Welker, Partridge, and Hardin 2011.

despite, but because of, its unrecognized status. Turning a profit has been an anticipated consequence of the PMR's existence. In the 1990s, the region was a money-laundering zone capable of converting useless Soviet rubles into cash.<sup>69</sup> Today, goods from Ukraine and Russia enter the region and quietly leave as "exports." These import-export schemes run the gamut from the mundane (used cars, alcohol, and frozen chicken) to illicit cargoes of arms, goods, and bodies.

At the level of political practice, local formations (i.e., parties, movements, initiative groups) seek to overcome non-recognition by creating durable identifications and understandings. One PMR social movement, Proryv, the subject of chapter five, began as a student initiative in 2005 and is today a political party with representation in the PMR legislature. Formed in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution and led by an enigmatic sociologist wanted by Interpol for murder, Proryv allegedly received startup financing from the Kremlin to thwart any future color revolutions in the post-Soviet space.<sup>70</sup> As an organization founded in the context of an ongoing "information war" between the West and Russia, Proryv points not to an incommensurable geopolitical opposition between the PMR/Russia and the West but to a set of structural commonalities between them. Proryv is indicative of the modern ritual of politics in the former Soviet space and illustrates how new knowledge and practices ("political technology") becomes a means of creating, at least temporarily, the identifications, brands, and the vocabulary required by democracy. Proryv shows how Western knowledge and marketing concepts have migrated to new contexts in the former Soviet Union.

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<sup>68</sup> Small business owners told of having to purchase their stock at one of Sheriff's wholesale retail centers.

<sup>69</sup> This scheme, instigated at the behest of Boris Yeltsin's Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, was centered around the Soviet 14th Army's military field bank. For more on this, see chapter four.

<sup>70</sup> Color revolution is a term that was widely used by the media to describe related movements that developed in several countries in the former USSR during the early 2000s. These include the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004). Each of these led to the defeat of pro-Russian leaders.

## **Transnistria, Irony, and the West**

As an ambiguous region in a peripheral country, Transnistria serves as a mirror that refracts many of the underlying political and economic practices that underpin our existence as political subjects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a political entity that has all of the institutional and symbolic aspects of statehood but lacks international recognition, Transnistria and the wider post-Soviet space offer unique sites for reconceptualizing political and legal authority from the murky underside of an increasingly globalized world. Transnistria elucidates the increasingly contingent, even desperate, character of liberal-democratic sovereignty in an era of unfettered finance capital, opaque state-corporate alliances, militarized borders, and popular alienation. These processes operate relatively transparently in Transnistria. Elsewhere, particularly in the West, elites go to even greater lengths to mask the “performative” dimension of their sovereignty.

Transnistria emerged as a direct result of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991; by whatever metric one measures the Soviet Union by (size, space, body count, etc.), the Soviet Union was a unique phenomenon with no analogues in history. As the defining project of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet Union and its recognized and unrecognized offspring serve as a strange mirror capable of alienating and estranging one from our own, comfortable, settled reality. When one looks at a place like Transnistria through the normative lens of democracy and capitalism as practiced by the West, one cannot help but notice how abnormal the region and its processes look to us, yet how strikingly normal these same processes are for residents. While it is all too easy to look at Transnistria and the wider post-Soviet world with a smug sense of superiority, the irony is that they are not different from us — the 2008 financial crisis only reinforces the idea that political inputs are predetermined, and that the interests of capital will remain ascendant.

This smug sense of superiority at this visibly deficient polity that has pretenses to a state — gawking at how they govern themselves against their own interests — tends to overshadow any heuristic import the region might convey, the most important being that they in fact are no different from us.

As the level of practice, while one can dismiss the PMR's use of referenda as a stage-managed tool of elites seeking a political mandate for statehood, referenda remain an increasingly important means to exercise agency in the political process in the European Union and in the United States. More important, however, is the potential referenda hold for pulling back the elaborately cultivated facade of reality that dictates the norms and forms of political practice. This is increasingly relevant as economic malaise envelopes the traditional Euro-Atlantic engines of capitalism. It is somewhat ironic that Greece's threat to hold a referendum in November 2011 on a European Union bailout shocked Europe and the financial markets. Given the fact that Greece's call for a referendum on an important national issue created significant turmoil in markets (which had, it must be noted, already severely constrained Greece's ability to govern as well and exercise its sovereignty), it behooves us as scholars to interrogate popular sovereignty in all its forms, particularly from the periphery. While referenda in a very fundamental sense constitute and formalize political practice in the PMR, their operation in other settings offers a useful basis for comparison.

### **Sovereignty or State Formation?**

Absent from the theoretical discussion above is the issue of state formation and the anthropology of the state. As the curious entity that serves as the “master noun of political discourse” (Geertz 1980: 121), the state is both a thing and a process, something that exists but

which is constantly reworked by individuals, institutions, and discourses. Anthropological research has revealed that state institutions are often fractured, reconfigured, and in conflict with one another.<sup>71</sup> Instead of searching for a hidden or overreaching source of authority, this project also looks at power in the “everyday forms of state formation” described by Joseph and Nugent (1994). While much of this dissertation concerns the formal performances and proclamations of sovereignty by PMR state officials, the informal realm of practice and everyday life remain important venues in which the PMR state maintains and projects a presence. From own twice weekly experiences at the passport office of the PMR Migration service, I am keenly aware of the fact that waiting to be processed and recognized by state institutions and bureaucracies helps to create to state for its constituents. The absence of the Moldovan only lessens its importance for residents.

While performative sovereignty remains the larger context in which the PMR state seeks international recognition, state formation occurs in the mundane moments of everyday life. As a polity that both is and is not a state, is useful to think of the state as a process, not an object, given that it is constantly being created. This creation requires movement and participation — refusing to speak of the PMR as a state, refusing to use its money, and ignoring its symbolic and actual power would severely undermine its claims over its territory and its constituents. Given the fact that the PMR state is not an *ex nihilo* state project but an ad hoc polity that emerged out of a concern with maintaining continuity with Soviet practices (as opposed to national ones), it remains far easier to create connections that build upon identifications and affective ties that existed in the Soviet period. For comparative purposes, the idea of tearing down the state institutions that emerged under Soviet tutelage and rebuilding (as is ongoing in other non-Russia

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<sup>71</sup> Abrams and Foucault deny the unity of the state and suggest a focus on the mundane routines through which bureaucrats assert state power (Abrams 1988; Foucault 1991). For a collection of classic and more recent essays on

areas of the Soviet periphery like Georgia, Moldova, and the Bălțic states) is not an option. The idea of the PMR as a state remains the primary means of harmonizing sentiments between how things were and how they ought to be.

State formation places a stress on continuity in order to highlight how political authority in the PMR is derived from maintaining fidelity (i.e., to Soviet practices, documents, passports, and state symbols, among other things) or equivalency with Russia as the legitimate successor to the Soviet state. In this context, the act of engaging with a state institution — enrolling in school, receiving medical care, obtaining a document, registering a marriage, transferring property, receiving any sort of benefit — creates the state both in the abstract and concretely for residents themselves. But given that PMR issued documents are not recognized internationally, the state fails in many ways. Being forced to carry the PMR's useless passport along with another passport is a reminder of this failure. One's required international visibility is precisely lacking insofar as PMR documents are not viewed outside of the PMR as valid forms of identification.<sup>72</sup> Interactions with the state are both situational and interactional, recreating the state-citizen nexus that tends to be lost in any discussion of the PMR's legitimacy due to its unrecognized status.

The contradictions of the PMR's international situation are embodied and lived through by residents who have no qualms about doing one thing but professing another. For residents, the contradictions in daily life are overshadowed by contradictions of the international system that they see as duplicitous but which, paradoxically, gives residents hope that the PMR might be recognized. Residents remain astutely aware of the vested interests at work in determining who and what can be recognized as sovereign. Examples like Kosovo are particularly important in the

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the anthropology of the state, see Sharma and Gupta 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Here I am reminded of one of Caroline Humphrey's anecdotes (2002: 26): "without papers, you are a tiny bug, but with papers you are a person." Her informant was remarking on the need to have a complete set of documents to



local political cosmology because it proves the duplicity of the West and validates their existence outside of the international system of sovereign states which PMR leaders profess to wish to join.

The larger paradox at work in this dissertation concerns the fact that PMR statehood itself is largely performative (ritual) yet it constantly in process (state formation); its durability only adds a sheen of permanence to these performances. Sometimes these performances are successful, and sometimes they are not. Both as an idea and as a set of institutions the state is in flux, but the conceptual terms that remain available to describe the situation are nouns: the state and sovereignty. As this dissertation shows, performative sovereignty captures how the state is never a thing but rather an emergent and never-complete process.

State formation has a vector-like feel; one gets the sense that it is going in a definite direction and seeks to achieve certain (definitive) results. With the PMR, however, upon closer inspection of the actual operation of the economy and the state one gets the sense that there is a cadre of individuals who need the PMR to exist in this perpetual state of liminality. Motion is necessary, but the motion need not necessarily be forward or even progress. A certain segment of the population accustomed to Soviet practices are content to let the nostalgic, time-warp aspect of the PMR as the Soviet Union write small continue ad infinitum. For those that profess to seek recognition (and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community) for the PMR, it is more important that spectators both inside and outside of the region believe that something worthwhile is happening in the region. That is, by nature of the fact that politics occurs with some degree of participation, and that one can at least observe the outlines of a polity that contains the institutions and forms of statehood, the PMR deserves to be seen as a state despite its liminal existence. Liminality is beneficial to turning profits, but state building requires, at least

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exist to the state: birth certificate, internal passport, workbook, registration [*propiska*], etc. The loss of one of these documents threatens to unravel the whole edifice of the state and its associated entitlements.

rhetorically, some sort of Hegelian progression to the revealed, recognized ideal form of statehood.

### **Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Encounter**

I conducted eighteen months of field research in Moldova and Transnistria. As a foreigner required to register each time I crossed the borders of the PMR (typically twice a week due to frequent trips to Chişinău), my fieldwork was very much about remaining visible to this unrecognized polity and attempting to follow its often contradictory laws and norms. In addition to registration at the border, a PMR citizen with a Tiraspol *propiska* (registration) had to register me as a guest in his place of residence. During preliminary fieldwork in 2006, foreigners who stayed in the PMR for more than twelve hours were required to have an invitation letter [*priglasenie*] approved by the Interior Ministry before being able to enter the PMR.

My original plan was to study the interaction between sovereignty and economic processes in the PMR (globalization, the informal economy, patronage networks and rent). Specifically, I was interested in how informal, unregulated economic processes undermine Moldova's *de jure* sovereignty but enhance the PMR's *de facto* sovereignty. I had high hopes of following shuttle traders [*chelnoki*] on their trips to Odessa and beyond, but this line of inquiry disintegrated as it became clear that a single economic conglomerate had monopolized the region's informal economy. I found that the best way to study political authority and sovereignty was not by asking about it as such but seeing how the state projected its influence and operated in a variety of settings. Over research, I found sovereignty was not limited to the realms of political authority and material processes. Instead, I encountered the PMR state in a variety of settings and sentiments. Not wanting to be the foreigner who pressed politics into every

discussion (though my presence was perceived as reflecting a political agenda), I conducted myself as any good ethnographer would and never refused an invitation.

As I looked at the origins of the PMR and its contemporary effects as a *de facto* sovereign state, I found this question of the political authority to related to perceived differences between left and right-bank Moldova. Over more than one hundred ethnographic interviews, unanticipated interactions, and chance encounters, I came to be seen less as a foreigner and more as a regular participant in the social and political life of Tiraspol. Though I was dogged by accusations of espionage (in part because my grant program was associated with the US State Department), I was never harassed, though my mobile phone was tapped and I was shadowed on public holidays when I gathered publicly with friends. On a few occasions, plainclothes state security officers photographed me on the streets.

Logistically, I lived with two local families during fieldwork, and regularly supplemented my time in the PMR with trips in Chişinău. In Tiraspol, the first household I boarded with was composed of a middle-aged couple with two resident children who often travelled abroad or to Chişinău for work. This was perhaps the most appropriate environment for an unmarried male in the region. The second household consisted of an elderly grandmother who had three generations of relatives in Tiraspol and southern Ukraine. My acquaintances with relatives from both families constituted important steppingstones in my field research.

The field of ethnographic research in the PMR was diverse, and included Kremlin-sponsored youth movements, NGOs, first generation political activists, political technologists and image makers, local intellectuals (professors and graduate students), and bureaucrats; I did

not want to position myself solely within a single organization for fear of inviting reprisals on locals due to their association with a foreigner without a reason for being in the region.<sup>73</sup>

## **Dissertation Arc**

This dissertation mirrors the arc of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by viewing its subject matter through the lens of the Soviet project from which the PMR emerged. It begins with the collapse of a quintessentially modernist political project in 1991 and ends with the rise of a largely self-referential polity in which the referents are of secondary importance to the form and performance of the messages themselves. What began as an idealistic project — think of the PMR as a kind of socialist realist fantasy without the coercion — ended up as a postmodern dystopia in which a constant stream of images occupy a structural niche similar to advertising in our modern consumer culture now determine the contours of social reality in the region. These images gloss over a post-Soviet period marked by decline.

To understand Transnistria as a political entity separate from Moldova, one must understand the institution of the referendum and the potential it holds for creating, harnessing, and channeling emotions into a political language with real effects. Referenda are a means of social control and, eventually, profits; they order society. Given the then-unsettled context of a potential independent Moldova, referendums held in left-bank Moldova formalized Transnistria's distinctiveness vis-à-vis Moldova. These referenda highlighted an already-existing linguistic and ethnic tension in the MSSR, which contributed to the outbreak of armed conflict in 1992. This conflict subsequently became a defining aspect of the PMR statehood insofar it was the inchoate PMR state, with the assistance of the former 14<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army, that protected the

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<sup>73</sup> Allegations of spying were common. It should be noted that I always presented myself as a researcher and never as a representative of any group, organization, or government.

region and its multi-ethnic inhabitants from violence and, according to PMR historiography, genocide. Given the ideological centrality of armed struggle, memorializing this conflict in both public and private venues (photographs, memory books, public memorials, public spectacles) became a means of distancing residents from the Moldovan state.

By creating a distinct teleology in which recognition dominates, elites profit and differentiate themselves from the masses and are masked by the rhetoric of independence and international recognition. Once de facto separation from Moldova was achieved and PMR statehood was tentatively established (i.e., it had created the functioning organs of governance), over the course of two decades, the state became a conduit for illicit capital accumulation. After PMR leaders had secured the long-term support of Russia as a patron, profit and rent seeking entered the picture, as the region became an area where, for connected individuals, profits could be realized on an outsized scale. In comparison, the majority of residents characterize the post-Soviet period as one of impoverishment and permanent instability at the personal level. These obvious class differences remain of secondary importance given the significant resources and rhetoric devoted to the idea of multi-nationalism in the PMR.

The Transnistrian conflict has expanded far beyond its brief temporality as an event. Over the course of two decades, the conflict has shifted from one measured in tanks, bodies, mortars, and damages to one that today is largely media-driven. Many residents, particularly younger ones, have no memories of armed conflict and instead rely on images and narratives generated by the media and a local PMR historiography that mythologizes the 1992 conflict.<sup>74</sup> This turn to marketing and public relations illustrates how the battle for public opinion serves the same strategic purpose that mines, barbed wire, and tanks once did — it serves to maintain separation.

This battle for public opinion constitutes an important front in an ongoing “information war” between Transnistria and Moldova.<sup>75</sup> As I show in chapter five through my case study on the PMR social movement and political party Proryv, geopolitical uncertainties and regional events like Ukraine’s Orange revolution have real effects in an area whose leadership is above all concerned not with managing the affairs of state but instead remains preoccupied with perceptions. State leaders must reiterate the PMR’s pretensions to statehood through performance in order to maintain an active presence for the PMR state for residents and outsiders. This managed yet participatory political engagement offers residents a means of partaking in political life while denying them agency in the process.

### **Themes and Structure of the Dissertation**

Each of the following chapters is rooted in a particular concept or field as articulated through an assemblage of ideas, individuals, and objects. While some chapters are abstract (chapters two and three), others deal with more substantive issues (chapters one and four), and some are solely the result of participant observation and ethnography (chapter five). My purpose was not to selectively pick and choose certain elements of everyday life, but to build upon locally resonant symbols, practices, and beliefs to illustrate the underlying concepts, practices, and beliefs that allowed the PMR to emerge as a *de facto* sovereign polity and to project its authority for more than two decades. Field research entailed studying the PMR as a system along with its *mise-en-scène*. This enabled me to look beyond the facts of PMR’s emergence as a polity and to explore the myriad of ways residents and state officials told its story and to engage its constituents, the residents who rehearse and co-perform as the ostensible holders of sovereignty.

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<sup>74</sup> Chapters three and five give the reader a sense of the roles played images and information locally. Chapter five in particular chronicles how new bodies of knowledge and marketing practices have permeated the region.

In this dissertation I discuss sovereignty both as a fundamental concept of politics and as a representative performance designed to achieve certain goals. Beginning with the region's earliest efforts to oppose Moldovan nationalism in the late 1980s, the story of sovereignty in the PMR begins with creating a constituent people [*narod*] and the expression of their collective voice through referendums. As a result of these referendums, the Transnistrian *narod* emerged as a political actor but were subsequently co-opted by elites. These elites, both state officials and corporate structures, realized their own economic ambitions at the people's expense. The people were left with empty promises and a vague hope that international recognition would solve ease their otherwise difficult situation. In reality, it is the situation and its vested interests that make resolution difficult.

The chronology of this dissertation covers the lifespan of the PMR. It begins in the late 1980s as the effects of perestroika come to be felt in the MSSR and ends in 2010 as the PMR celebrates its twentieth anniversary. This dissertation begins with the sudden end of a modernist project, the Soviet Union, and ends with the emergence of a virtual, postmodern state. With the former, I look at how Soviet institutions and knowledge were reconstituted to create a non-national state. I tell the story of how a group of people who lacked a well-defined position in the Moldovan national state created a place for themselves in a rapidly changing post-Soviet world. With the latter, I look at the shifting sands of identity and community in the post-Soviet period, in particular how left-bank residents' struggles against Moldovan nationalism became a stage-managed affair in which the appearance of democracy, competitive elections, and civil society must be maintained at all costs to sustain the predatory economic practices that sustain the state.

My dissertation shows how sovereignty is enabled by cultural, experiential (trauma, stories of loss and violence), geopolitical (financial support from the Russian Federation), and

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<sup>75</sup> I adopt the term in response to its use by my interlocutors in the region.

historical factors (nostalgia and the narration of a an ideology that forecloses rapprochement). Economic processes have “commercialized” Transnistria’s tenuous sovereignty by using the region as a conduit for capital accumulation, with the state abrogating its obligations to its citizens.

Chapter one offers a historical background of the Transnistria. It is designed to give the unfamiliar reader background for the chapters that follow. Beginning with an overview of the region in the late Soviet period, it looks at how cultural and linguistic issues became contentious issues in Soviet Moldova in the late 1980s. Eventually, Transnistria separated from Moldova in 1990 and fought a brief war with Moldova in 1992. In this chapter I highlight the role played by Soviet knowledge and categories in Transnistria’s self-image and on the practical role played by the 14<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army in the conflict.

My second chapter (“Creating a People: Referendums, Nostalgia, and Subjectivity”) looks at the emergence of the Transnistrian people as a collective actor and object of knowledge. This chapter looks at how the preconditions for a sovereign political authority were created through referendums. Referendums offered a means to invoke and help create the constituent unit of popular sovereignty, the people (*narod*). The Transnistrian people emerged from a combination of a unique Transnistrian narrative that weds Soviet forms of knowledge with local participation in political processes during a time of heightened uncertainty and insecurity. Both at the level of ideas (ideology) and practice, pro-PMR activists translated anxiety about the demise of the Soviet Union into a coherent ideology and sense of belonging for a community that transcends the national but strives for the same goals that nations do.

Chapter three (“Bespredel and Belonging: Bodies, Politics, Publics”) illustrates how the PMR state has produced a community of affect through visual means by reproducing and



dissemination photographs of bystanders and combatants killed during armed conflict with Moldova. In the context of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and a generalized sense of disorder [*bespredel*], I argue that these narratives of victimization and aggression afford individuals a means of making sense of experiences while also creating an inchoate community of belonging – *They did this to us*. More broadly, this narrative establishes who “they” are and the “us” referred to. These images of death served as a common anchor for residents of the region. These images and their emergence within a genre of memorial books serve as an experiential and ideological foundation for the unrecognized state.

Chapter four (“The Economics of Separatism: Fiefdoms, Subsidies, and the Virtual”) illustrates how local and international economic processes have forced the PMR into a state of dependency whereby the region remains economically dependent upon Russian support and its subsidized natural gas. Just as sovereignty in the PMR is performed and as a result generates real effects, the PMR’s economy is similarly based on a subjective component in which images, representations, and the productivity of the Soviet past conspire to mask a predatory system in which the people become fodder for an economic system that ceaselessly realizes a profit. To maintain this facade of productivity PMR authorities selectively highlight a few visible subsidies and contrast the region’s past and future growth to neighboring Moldova, Europe’s poorest country. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to exploring how a local holding company, Sheriff, has monopolized the bulk of the PMR economy.

Chapter five, “Che Guevara in Tiraspol: Geopolitics, Knowledge, and Spectacle,” explores political spectacle in the PMR. The ethnographic subject is a local youth movement, Proryv (Breakthrough). Formed in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Proryv was financed as part of an initial anti-Orange movement by the Kremlin to diminish the threat of

colored revolutions. As a political movement, Proryv utilizes the form of pro-democratic movements as a vehicle for pro-Russian geopolitical goals. Weaving together the local, the geopolitical, and the idea of an ongoing “information war,” this chapter investigates how, in the context of non-recognition, political technology becomes a means of creating the identifications, brands, and the vocabulary required by democracy. This chapter pays particular attention to how western knowledge and marketing terminology has migrated to new contexts and practical domains in Transnistria.

## CHAPTER ONE

### TRANSNISTRIA IN THE (POST-)SOVIET PERIOD

#### Introduction

Moldova experienced a brief but bloody conflict in 1992 over a strip of land located east of the Dniester River. Inhabitants of this strip of land first declared their independence from Moldova in the form of the *Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic* (PMSSR), a territory that residents hoped would remain in the Soviet Union when it became clear that Moldova would become independent.<sup>76</sup> With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1990, the PMSSR would become the *Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic* (PMR), also known as Transnistria. More than two decades later, the PMR is an international orphan, unrecognized as a state and sustained largely by economic and political support from the Russian Federation.

Transnistrian separatism relates to geopolitical issues described alternately as “post-communist transitions,” “democratization,” “ethnic conflict,” or simply “transition.” This dissertation tells a story of a peripheral region’s rebellion against the collapse of certainties that arose as a result of the material, social, and cultural effects of Soviet state.<sup>77</sup> Soviet development transformed a war-torn region that had undergone a brutal Romanian occupation during the Second World War into an area brimming with productive factories and collective farms. The region had a significant multi-ethnic population that predated the region’s incorporation into Imperial Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Economic productivity and a strong identification with the Soviet state differentiated Transnistria from the rest of Moldova, though both were part of the

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<sup>76</sup> The first declaration occurred in 1990 in the context of the Soviet Union. The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) was originally conceived of as new Soviet republic separate from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic (MSSR).

<sup>77</sup> For a discussion of a similar situation in the Russian Caucasus, see Derluguian 1999 and 2005.

same titular republic.<sup>78</sup> As Soviet power faded in the late 1980s, residents organized in opposition to Moldovan nationalism. These actions, and authorities' responses to them, nudged the region down a path of separation and war. This chapter serves as a historical overview necessary to understand the emergence of the PMR as a polity in 1990.

The Soviet state was central to life in the region, and residents believed in its ideals. As an economically prosperous, multi-ethnic region, Transnistria's prospects in an independent Moldova remained uncertain. Moldova's rapprochement with Romania and fears of Moldova's liquidation as an independent state (an unification of Greater Romania)<sup>79</sup> only raised the stakes. This led to a situation in which residents found themselves at the mercy of geopolitical forces.<sup>80</sup> The Russian Federation supports Transnistria and maintains peacekeeping forces in the region. While these peacekeeping forces monitor the conflict settlement, they offer Russia a means of direct influence in Moldova and in the larger Black Sea region.<sup>81</sup>

Local and foreign capital have benefitted from the PMR's unsettled political situation. A single local economic entity, Sheriff, holds a monopoly position in the PMR economy, and Russian and Ukrainian capital profitably exploits the PMR's murky regulatory environment. Above all, the Transnistrian state building project is marked by incompleteness: of a revolution unfulfilled, of prosperity lost, and sovereignty unrecognized. This incompleteness creates the

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<sup>78</sup> This identification with the Soviet project was expressed primarily as a support for internationalism and through Soviet economic development in which the industrial workplace was central to social life.

<sup>79</sup> Moldova was part of greater Romania from 1918 until 1940. The Romanian wartime general Ion Antonescu led a brutal campaign and used left-bank Moldova as killing field for Jews and other undesirables from Moldova and southern Ukraine. His use of Transnistria was justified by pointing to how it was not part of historic Romanian lands. For more on this, see Solonari 2009 and King 2011, particularly chapter 9, "The Fields of Transnistria."

<sup>80</sup> Residents see themselves as living on a strategically important piece of land that, by the fact that it exists within a perceived geopolitical fault line between Russia and the West. Today, this importance is framed as a struggle between Russia, on the one hand, and NATO and the EU on the other.

<sup>81</sup> The 1992 cease-fire agreement that ended armed conflict in the region stipulated the creation of a tripartite peacekeeping force comprised of Moldovan, Russian, and Transnistrian units. Ukraine has military observers. Originally, Russia had 2,000 peacekeepers in addition to a few thousand other military personnel in the region. Currently, Russian has 1,500 peacekeeping soldiers, supplemental Russian forces in the region now number around two hundred.

conditions whereby Soviet experiences, knowledge, and categories are reassembled according to contemporary demands.<sup>82</sup> As a state-building project the PMR builds upon Soviet knowledge and categories that offered a means of subsuming one's nationality [*national 'nost'*] to Soviet internationalism. In the PMR, the factory was the crucible of identity formation, with a Russophone workplace fostering the emergence of a Soviet identity. Transnistria's significant population of Soviet migrants created a situation in which no single nationality was dominant.

### Nationality and the Soviet State

In the Soviet Union, nationhood and nationality were distinct from statehood and citizenship; each individual had a nationality and resided in a national republic, yet each was a citizen of the Soviet Union. Nationality was both a means of social classification and a territorial imperative.<sup>83</sup> Soviet nationality policy attempted to bridge the gap between nations as the constituent political units of the Soviet state and nationality as an ascriptive element of one's identity. Ethnic and national categories were not congruent with political territories.<sup>84</sup> The Soviet Union was divided into union republics that were sovereign. Each nominally had the power to secede, enter into foreign relations, and administer their territory, though in reality these powers were more virtual than real.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> This is the process of *bricolage* described by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*.

<sup>83</sup> For more on Soviet nationality policy, see Hirsch 2005, Martin 2001, Slezkine 1994. Hirsch's *Empire of Nations* focuses on how Imperial ethnographers and local elites utilized ethnographic knowledge as a basis for the Soviet state. Martin's *Affirmative Action Empire* chronicles how Soviet authorities sought to undermine "negative" aspects of nationalism or ethnic particularism by promoting other "positive" aspects of the same phenomenon.

<sup>84</sup> E.g., having a Ukrainian nationality did not confer the right to reside and work in the Ukrainian SSR.

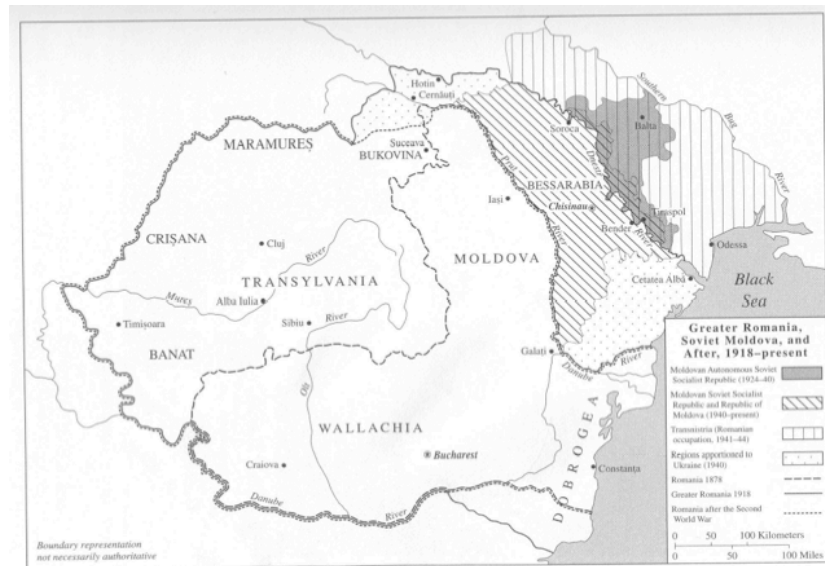
<sup>85</sup> As a system of social classification, ethnic nationality was a "principle of vision and division" of the social world operated at different levels (Bourdieu 1990: 134). *Natsional 'nost'* constituted a means of social accounting, an interpretive grid for public discussions, a set of boundary-markers, and a legitimate vehicle for public and private identities. More importantly, it provided a "ready-made template for claims to sovereignty" when political space expanded under *glasnost* (Brubaker 1996: 24).

The Soviet Union's constituent (and later, successor) states existed as quasi-nation-states with fixed territories, administrations, elites, and the constitutionally enshrined right to secession (Brubaker 1996: 41). These republics resembled nation-states insofar as they served as vehicles for national self-determination. Nations were gifts to the USSR's constituent peoples, gifts that would only later be inherited.<sup>86</sup> Bolshevik attempts to build socialism in former imperial territories took place against the backdrop of the Paris Peace Conference's exaltation of the "national idea" (Hirsch 2005: 5). To reconcile their anti-imperialist position with their desire to retain the territories of Imperial Russia, the Soviet state deliberately constructed republics as polities belonging to the nationalities whose names they bore but limited the domains in which they were autonomous. This desire to cast themselves in the roles of liberators and nation builders forced the Bolsheviks to borrow ideas and practices from the West. Not content to control, they sought to secure the loyalties of local elites and introduced administrative structures that encouraged or demanded mass participation (Hirsch 2005: 5).



**Fig 3. Romanian Lands before 1812 (King 2000: xxx)**

<sup>86</sup> This builds upon a historic engagement of the Imperial Russian state with peripheral territories and peoples: civilization was a gift. See Grant 2009.



**Fig 4.** Greater Romania, Soviet Moldova: 1918 to Present (King 2000: xxxi)

The formation of the MASSR in 1924 was a political move by Stalin to assert a separate Moldovan language and ethnicity that would bring Romania under Soviet influence. Soviet hopes for westward expansion rested upon the belief that cross-border ethnic ties could be exploited to project Soviet influence.<sup>87</sup> Soviet Moldova (the MSSR, formed in 1940) united two territories never jointly administered under any political authority: the eastern part of the MASSR (including Transnistria) and the imperial province of Bessarabia, part of Greater Romania from 1918 until 1940. The Soviet Union never recognized the Romanian annexation of Bessarabia<sup>88</sup> in 1918. The MASSR was created “due to Moldavia’s future political perspective” – the eventual incorporation of Bessarabia to the USSR (Martin 2001: 275). In 1940, Transnistria

<sup>87</sup> This Piedmont Principle sought to exploit a means of influencing the internal affairs of neighboring countries and was the basis for the formation of the MASSR (Martin 2001: 274).

<sup>88</sup> Bessarabia remained a part of Romania from 1918 until 1940. Bessarabia was bordered into the West by the Prut River (currently the border between Romanian and the Republic of Moldova) and into the East by the Dniester River (currently the border between the PMR and Moldova).

became part of Soviet Moldova, though it had been a part of the USSR since the end of the Russian Civil war.

Soviet support for a Moldovan cultural awakening was intended to prevent the disloyalty<sup>89</sup> on the western periphery by denying similarities to the Romanian nation-state that existed just beyond its borders.<sup>90</sup> With the creation of the MASSR in 1924, Soviet authorities began creating a new Moldovan people and language in earnest. Soviet authorities hailed the appearance of Moldovan histories, textbooks, grammars, and newspapers as hallmarks of a Moldovan national awakening. Liberated from their bourgeois Romanian oppressors, the Moldovan people and state were indebted to a Soviet state that had allowed for their reemergence as a separate people and state.<sup>91</sup> Individuals who identified as Romanian suddenly became Moldovan, and Soviet propagandists agitated for the unification of all Moldovans, the majority of whom lived in Bessarabia.

Both the Soviet Union and Romania viewed a Moldovan identity as a malleable construct that could be suited to their respective political agendas.<sup>92</sup> Stalin's efforts to bring Moldova into the Soviet Union sought to fix an identity that had vacillated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The fact Moldova was intermittently under Russian and Romanian rule contributed to

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<sup>89</sup> For more on the dynamics that informed Soviet policies on the western frontier, see Weiner 2006

<sup>90</sup> Of particular importance for this dissertation is the historical demarcation of Romanian lands. Historic Romanian lands largely coincided with the ancient Dacian state and were delimited by three major rivers, Tisza, Dniester and the Danube, and the Black Sea, while the Carpathian Mountains are seen as the backbone of the Romanian national homeland, its defining element. To this day, Romanians refer to the opening verse of the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu's *Doina*, "From Tisa to the Nistru's tide." Romanian lands thus include Moldova, but exclude Transnistria.

<sup>91</sup> The issue of whether Moldovans and Romanians constitute separate peoples is complex and remains controversial today.

<sup>92</sup> Romania's unification with Moldova occurred amidst a time of geopolitical uncertainty. After the October Revolution in 1917 and the Ukrainian proclamation of independence, Bessarabia (Moldova) found itself isolated and circumstances dictated the proclamation of a state. The short-lived Democratic Republic of Moldova (DRM) was formed on January 24th, 1918. This polity barely survived for two months. On March 27th, its assembly voted, by roughly two thirds, for unification with Romania. Unification was not driven by national feelings; Moldova's liquidation as a state was a result of fears about being incorporated into Ukraine and the threat of a resurgent Russia.



a situation whereby Moldova lacked a stable national idea.<sup>93</sup> Even today, many prominent politicians and nationalists in Moldova cannot agree as to whether Moldova should be an independent country or should be part of Romania. Attempts to fix this identity waxed and waned throughout the Soviet period.

Moldovan distinctiveness was threatened, paradoxically, by its exit from the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, Moldovan intellectuals were fervently pan-Romanian (Unionist) and unification seemed inevitable, though ultimately Moldova became a sovereign state. This brief flirtation with Romanian unification is a political mantra in Transnistria. The idea of a distinct Moldovan people under the threat of Romanian annexation structures a set of distinctions that allow for the PMR to present itself as the protector of the Moldovan language (written in Cyrillic, not Latin) and people. These linguistic and orthographic distinctions are based on the Soviet Union's efforts to create a separate Moldovan identity. While the PMR state project claims to protect the Moldovan identity and language, what they are protecting are Soviet conceptions of Moldovans and of the Moldovan language.<sup>94</sup> This is often at odds with how Moldovans in the PMR see themselves. Protecting Soviet knowledge and beliefs together constitute another unreciprocated gift that takes on a life of its own in the post-Soviet context.<sup>95</sup>

With the onset of *glasnost* in the 1980s, Moldova's unresolved questions once again came to the fore. In the March 1990 elections in the MSSR, the Popular Front of Moldova (FPM) won in a landslide. The FPM saw their main goal as a transitory one that mirrored Moldova's

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Perhaps fittingly, the Romanian Army was already stationed in Bessarabia and the Romanian prime minister anxiously awaited a positive decision in the foyer (King 2000: 35).

<sup>93</sup> Moldova was a part of Imperial Russia during the formative moments of Romanian nation building in the late 19th and early 20th century.

<sup>94</sup> Often Russian-speaking residents of Transnistria would make claims about the separateness of Moldovan and Romanian, and about how Moldovan was should intended to be written within Cyrillic, not with Latin characters. In almost all of these cases, interlocutors knew only a few words and lack any understanding of its grammar and structure.

1918 unification with Romania. The FPM's political victory culminated on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1990 with the "bridge of flowers" that joined both sides the Prut River, the border between Romania and Soviet Moldova. This event involved more than a million people meeting at border crossings after a half-century of separation. Soviet authorities were forced to open borders that had been closed for decades despite obvious cultural and kinship connections. Moldovans and Romanians with Unionist tendencies compare this moment with the fall of the Berlin wall.<sup>96</sup>

### **Anxiety and Belonging in Post-Soviet Transnistria**

After World War II Transnistria was a central component of the Soviet defense industry. Demographic changes occurred alongside industrialization as Soviet migrants arrived to work in regional enterprises. In 1936, Russians constituted 14 percent of the region's population, but by 1989 Russians made up nearly a quarter of the Transnistrian population, with Ukrainians making up 28 percent (King 2000: 183). Though Moldovans formed a plurality in 1989 (39%), they represented only a quarter of urban dwellers. To a certain degree the labels of Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian obscure how quintessentially Soviet the region was. Ethnic differences operated in the context of an urban-rural dichotomy in which urban centers were Russian speaking with Moldovan the language of the countryside.

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<sup>95</sup> For an interesting discussion of language, interethnic relations, and hospitality as a model for ethnic relations in right-bank Moldova, see Cash 2004.

<sup>96</sup> Subsequent attempts to project Romanian influence into Moldova have played out in the realm of citizenship (in 2007 Romania became a member of the European Union). More than a few fervent Moldovan Unionists have made political careers in Romania, and many high-ranking Moldovan officials have Romanian citizenship. At the nadir of Romanian-Moldovan relations in 2008, the Romanian President Traian Basescu announced that Romania had received, over the past few years, more than 800,000 request for regaining Romanian citizenship, many of which were submitted by families. With Moldova's population on hovering around 3.6 million, the fact that nearly a million have applied for Romanian citizenship undermines its sovereignty. The issue of dual citizenship with Romania is a challenge to Moldovan sovereignty because Romania has yet to recognize Moldova's borders and members of the political establishment openly voice irredentist sentiments during national campaigns. Yet Romania's challenge to Moldovan sovereignty pales in comparison to the *de facto* sovereign polity within its borders.

In the postwar period, Transnistria came to play an outsized role in residents' biographies insofar as their careers, livelihoods, and identities were tied to the region. Left-bank residents stressed their commonalities with the Soviet project. Transnistria was a favored retirement area for career military personnel [*voennye*], privileged citizens who had served faithfully and accrued certain benefits vis-à-vis the non-military population. Many retired in Transnistria due to its mild climate and proximity to the Black Sea.<sup>97</sup> Despite the short distance between Chișinău and Tiraspol (76 kilometers), there were significant differences in how left and right-bank populations viewed cultural and economic changes of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.<sup>98</sup>

The Soviet state rooted left-bank residents in a particular space for a socially worthwhile productive endeavor. Many residents I interviewed told of family who settled in the aftermath of World War II. They repopulated the region, rebuilt it, and worked in its factories and collective farms. The centrally planned Soviet economy gave residents a sense of purpose and provided for them. It is worth noting Marx's belief that humans are inherently productive beings. When this productivity was threatened, residents' terms of existence both as political subjects and citizens of a socialist state were forever altered. The undoing of the socialist project thrust a fundamental question into the public sphere: what would happen as Moldova transformed itself into a nation-state? Uncertainty created the opportunity to build a polity where none existed. The Soviet Union was the state with a decades long tradition of sovereignty in left-bank Moldova; its demise unleashed a long-suppressed nationalism previously contained by the Soviet state. As nationalism engulfed Moldova and Romanian unification seemed possible, Transnistria would cling even harder to Soviet internationalism.

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<sup>97</sup> "The primary loyalty of individuals in the region was not to Russia – even though most spoke Russian and had ties to the Russian republic – but to the Soviet Union" (King 2000: 184).

<sup>98</sup> Chișinău is the capital of the Republic of Moldova, and Tiraspol is the capital of the PMR.

Over the course of research, both PMR elites and ordinary citizens spoke of how the PMR was an idealistic project intended as a corrective to the Soviet state. Left-bank residents professed fidelity to Soviet ideals and believed in the idea of the Soviet [*sovetskii narod*].<sup>99</sup> In a somewhat ironic manner, Transnistrians embodied the post-national stage of development posited by Lenin. The PMR became an umbrella for a host of informal groups that stood to lose in an independent Moldova. These included factory leaders and the economic intelligentsia of the region who would have lost control of the region's rich industrial base; Soviet state security officers who have allegedly have used the PMR as a means of preserving enriching themselves; criminals and profiteers (the standard "dark forces" who profit from armed conflict); and the left-bank residents who attempted to preserve the disappearing Soviet state.<sup>100</sup>

As a region permeated by the symbolic, ideological, and material effects of Soviet modernity, the PMR offers a unique perspective on how institutions, economies, individuals, knowledge, and practices are reworked in the absence of any legally recognized authority. As Soviet society was exposed to market forces and competitive politics, a relatively stable semiotic environment was replaced by one in which performances and the citation of Soviet knowledge offered a means of creating identifications and a polity (Yurchak 2005); these processes were never fully discursive or semiotic.

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<sup>99</sup> This was the case even among the first post-Soviet generation that had little experiences with the Soviet state.

<sup>100</sup> One retired Moldovan diplomat told me of a discussion he had with Anatoly Sobchak in the 1990s. Sobchak was at the time mayor of St. Petersburg (and mentor of both Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev). Sobchak informed him that the idea for Transnistria was born in a KGB policy institute. It was part of a contingency plan to create artificial territorial conflicts across the Soviet Union to preserve and protect their interests. With the PMR, there are numerous politicians and state officials (most notably, the Minister of State Security, Vladimir Antuifiev) who

## **Language, Demography, and the 1989 Language Law**

Moldova's shift from a Soviet republic to a nation-state was modeled on the Bălțic independence movements. Like the Baltics, Moldova was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940 under the auspices of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Similarly, its industry was Russophone and staffed by individuals, typically Russians, who self-identified as Soviet. Linguistic grievances fueled political movements for sovereignty outside of the centralized Soviet state. In Moldova, the issue of language and their respective ideologies — Russian as the cosmopolitan, internationalist language and Moldovan as the language of a suppressed national culture — offered radically different visions for the future and intimated a reversal of longstanding practice. By using the familiar language of Soviet internationalism, left-bank activists positioned themselves as defenders of Soviet values. Creating a movement on the basis of Soviet categories allowed them to build upon a set of social and cultural symbols that appealed to residents who saw nationalism as an existential threat.

The Moldovan national movement sought to reverse more than four decades of Russian cultural dominance at the expense of Moldovan language and culture. The issues of Russian immigration, linguistic discrimination, and the denial of obvious commonalities with Romania were condensed in the late 1980s under the rubric of the “language question.” For a political establishment seeking to constitute itself on a national basis, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet symbolized the dominance of Soviet rule. Due to large numbers of non-Moldovan speakers, it

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spontaneously came to the region as the conflict was developing. Antuifeev came to the region on an assumed name after being accused of "crimes against the state" by the Latvian government.

often was not possible to use Romanian in public.<sup>101</sup> By 1989, the national question had become the singular concern of the Moldovan political establishment.<sup>102</sup>

On August 31, 1989, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet in Chişinău adopted a series of laws that (1) declared Moldovan the state language of the republic; (2) mandated the transition to the Latin alphabet (the Cyrillic script was used in Soviet times); (3) recognized the unity of the Moldovan and Romanian languages; and (4) laid out a program for extending the use of Moldovan in government, education, and other related spheres (Ciscel 2007: 42; King 2000: 120). These laws offered an initial means of difference around which a national community could coalesce and marked a decisive shift away from Soviet practice. Left-bank residents spoke of being marked insofar as they now found themselves speaking a foreign language in their own land. When viewed alongside this push for centralization by Chişinău, many left-bank residents saw these laws as a threat to their privileged position insofar as they marked a shift to the Moldovan majority and away from those who had long held power.<sup>103</sup> Moldova's emergence as an independent country was paradoxical insofar as its legislature quickly voted to adopt the Romanian flag, anthem, and state symbols.

What was originally a linguistic dispute quickly infused other domains. In Transnistria, equality in linguistic and cultural realms was assured by the widespread use of Russian. As Soviet authority faltered and the Union fragmented along national lines, constituting a polity on

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<sup>101</sup> Moldovan is one of the names of the Romanian language spoken in the Republic of Moldova. It is nearly identical to Romanian, save for a few minor orthographical changes. Moldovan is written in the Latin script in the Republic in Moldova, while it is written in Cyrillic in the PMR.

<sup>102</sup> In Moldova, the national question remains unsettled. While in the Republic of Moldova citizenship is explicitly non-national (all residents of the territory of the former MSSR have the right to citizenship), the question of a Moldovan nationality remains open. Unlike other titular republics that became independent on the basis of asserting their nationality, Moldovans became independent by denying the linguistic and cultural distinctions that underpinned the MSSR as a polity. The Romance language spoken in Moldova is, alternately, either Romanian, Moldovan, or the state language [*limba de stat*].

<sup>103</sup> Compared to right-bank Moldova, Transnistria had been collectivized and under Soviet rule since the revolution and underwent collectivization. Cadres from Transnistria dominated the Communist Party of Moldova. They were

national or linguistic grounds simply was not possible due to the region's multi-ethnic population. Given the absence of a titular nationality, Transnistria's economic independence came to be seen as the guarantor of the "rights and dignity of the peoples of Transnistria, and a basis for creating an independent state."<sup>104</sup> Labor collectives organized under the auspices of the United Work Collective Council (OSTK) formed a local power base that became the core of the PMR state that exists to this day.

Left-bank residents believed that nationalists would dominate the region and disenfranchise non-Moldovans. Themselves conscious of how industry served as a source of local identity, activists sought to prevent any such economic takeover that could potentially have threatened their economic well-being and their multiethnic, Soviet-era identity.<sup>105</sup> The fears of non-Moldovan residents — the threat of dismissal and unemployment, the closing of enterprises, ethnic quotas, and a disruption of the centrally-planned Soviet economy that allowed Transnistria to initially prosper — touched upon a deep-rooted anxiety over the region's future that nationalism brought to light.<sup>106</sup> Despite being framed by the PMR elite as a fight against ethnic chauvinism, the conflict was never about protecting linguistic rights.<sup>107</sup> Today, Chişinău boasts

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seen as more politically loyal than those from Bessarabia, having been educated and socialized longer in the Soviet Union. See King 2000: 182-183.

<sup>104</sup> Information from the website of the PMR Supreme Soviet, <http://www.vspmr.org>. Accessed March 2, 2010.

<sup>105</sup> It is a stretch to say that this identity was Transnistrian. Residents today, especially those who lived through the 1980s and the 1992 conflict with Moldova, tend to remark that both the region and its inhabitants were always different from Moldova. These exact sentiments are also voiced in right-bank Moldova by ethnic Moldovans vis-à-vis left-bank Moldova.

<sup>106</sup> The still-uncertain teleology of Moldovan nationalism -- to this day left-bank residents still question whether its ultimate goal is unification with Romania -- resulted in an initial declaration of independence from Moldova in 1990. This 1990 declaration formalized Transnistria's desire to form an autonomous republic in the context of the MSSR. Essentially, it sought to differentiate the region from the MSSR but to remain in the Soviet Union.

<sup>107</sup> Though some Moldovan residents complain that the Moldovan language is marginalized in the region, particularly at Moldovan language schools and in the university, many prominent Moldovans actively took part in early state-building efforts. The PMR's official historiography stresses that Moldovans, as well as Russians and Ukrainians, were victims of Moldovan/Romanian aggression.

more Russian speakers than all of Transnistria.<sup>108</sup> The conflict lies at the level of elite politics over how to divide the material inheritance of the Soviet state.<sup>109</sup>

Elites on both sides conjured up constituencies to increase their own power. Left-bank elites gained by promoting separatism, for if they submitted to the language law they could have lost their jobs, influence, and perquisites. Instead of refusing to adopt certain provisions of the law, city councils in left-bank Moldova voted to defy the law in full. This logic of rejection and their steadfast refusal to compromise raised the stakes of the dispute (Kaufman 2001). In Transnistria, strikes were organized throughout the region's factories. When workers refused to strike, they were forced to do so through lockouts. Strikes offered not only a means of political participation, but also access to material and symbolic benefits. It was not uncommon to hear of participants and organizers receiving televisions, pensions, and even apartments for their participation along with various medals and commendations. The poisonous media environment further polarized the situation, as the left-bank press stoked a siege mentality and inclinations toward a violent response from Moldova. Each side exacerbated the deteriorating security situation: Transnistria provoked the volatile nationalist movement into overreacting and used this overreaction to justify their subsequent steps toward secession.<sup>110</sup>

### **Internationalist Nationalism?**

Throughout the following discussion I resist using the concept of nationalism to describe the PMR state-building project. This emerged partially out of fidelity to my informants who

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<sup>108</sup> Personal interview with Moldovan Deputy Minister of Reintegration Ion Stavila, June 2009.

<sup>109</sup> "The reaction to the national movement was not a revolt by minorities, but a revolt by a displaced elite against those who threatened to unseat them" (King 2000: 187).

<sup>110</sup> The Transnistrian revolution did not so much break Moldova's monopoly of power (since it was never fully established in the context of the fall of the Soviet Union) as subtract enough territory to hastily erect a counter-state which, over time, eroded Moldova's possession of force. One should note the parallel with Anderson's (2010) thoughts on the Chinese Revolution.



would to preface any discussion that touched upon the issues of nationality/ethnicity by highlighting the PMR's internationalism and its explicitly anti-national ethos. Despite such proclamations, one cannot help but to see the creation of a Transnistrian historiography and its associated symbolic accoutrements of statehood as anything but nationalism. Yet this raises an interesting set of questions: can a non-titular movement defined in opposition to nationalism be seen as nationalist? More generally, what occurs to those individuals and communities who place themselves outside of the nation but who are, legally speaking, part of it?

Much of the PMR's durability in the eyes of residents emerges from its channeling Soviet internationalism as an antidote to nationalism. The classic methods of nation-building — creating a history, a people, a common nostalgia for a shared history and feelings of belonging — can be seen as pro forma requirements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, for in the post-socialist age in which multi-national states and empires are few and far between, states are equated with nations. In PMR, the state building project reflects their particular way of fitting the forms, categories, and identities of the Soviet period into a normative frame. Previously, the Soviet Union, and today in the PMR, one's nationality is enshrined in one's passport. In conversation, people describe themselves in ethnic or linguistic terms, but when the conversation turns to the PMR as a state and as a collective amalgamation of residents, one's individual nationality disappears. There is no hyphenated existence (e.g., Ukrainian-Transnistrian). As a community that has sought to remain both faithful to the Soviet melting pot, it is no surprise that the national does not supersede everything else. Ethnic labels, like any categories or modes of classifying one's existence as a political subject, are deployed differentially in different social situations.

Transnistrians have been more successful at foisting this nationalist label (and all of its unsavory associations) on Moldova. Engaging nationalism in the PMR despite its professed

antipathy towards it will help us better understand the constant performance of the state and to view state formation and performative sovereignty as analogous to the production of the nation. Many of the characters described in this dissertation could be seen as ardent nationalists, yet they remain critical of the national state in which they reside. To this end the PMR reproduces, on its own term, a thinly disguised discourse of nationalism masked as internationalism. This brings up the question as to whether internationalism can be the basis for a national project. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, residents became aware that they were not in control of the nation in which they resided. This dissolution of a unitary state into a series of independent nations of often-unsettled geopolitical provenance illustrates what happens when national forms are unleashed from their stable existence within a centrally controlled Soviet political project. As a state that is not quite a state, and a nation that masquerades as a collection of many, Transnistria offers a unique addendum to a discussion of nationalism in the post-1991 period.

Nationalism in Transnistria is not ethnically based. It is better viewed as a type of kinship writ large, an extended Soviet family that banded together in spite of its dissolution. This extended family metaphor is used to stress that its national ties are, like extended families today often are, created rather than simply extant — biology is not the sole determinant of kinship.

While the issue of ethno-nationalism versus the (I hesitate to introduce another hyphenated term) state-nationalism might be seen by some as nationalism, I resist calling it nationalism simply because my informants have ever so effectively eluded and disarmed nationalism by eliminating it from their political lexicon. This "nationalism without nationalism" is only possible because of the Soviet state — residents know what ethno-nationalism is and can identify these terms because of the Soviet Union. Similarly, they know they are Romanian, Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian, or Jewish because of the Soviets too. They also owe

their current identity as Transnistrians to their experiences in the Soviet state. Given the fact that the PMR resides within the borders of a country that has failed as a nation but remains a success as a state, Transnistria can be seen as a unique mix of national and internationalist elements within an ambiguous country. Given this situation, the PMR deserves to be recognized in all of its peculiarity as an attempt to create a nation without an ethno-national base.

### **The Birth of the PMR**

PMR elites began creating parallel state structures after the passage of the Moldovan language laws in 1989.<sup>111</sup> On September 2, 1990, an extraordinary session of deputies from left-bank Moldova proclaimed the existence of the PMSSR as a separate republic of the Soviet Union.<sup>112</sup> In addition to being Independence Day, “Day of the Republic,” September 2<sup>nd</sup> marks the beginning of the PMR’s self-referentiality, as its declaration was recognized neither by Moldovan authorities nor by Moscow. Seeking quickly to retain control of the region’s industry, officials announced that all property in the region had passed into possession of the PMSSR. Moldovan authorities proclaimed this declaration null and void, since it was unconstitutional and violated Moldova’s territorial integrity. Until this point, separation had taken the form of strikes, blockades, referendums, and proclamations; blood had not been spilled, though conflict loomed.<sup>113</sup> In response to this declaration, the Moldovan Interior Ministry formed a special police corps of 10,000 that would eventually become the principal force to oppose separatism

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<sup>111</sup> The earliest political organizing in the region focused on the idea of local autonomy. Neither autonomy nor the details of it were discussed by a wide public. Discussions occurred exclusively inside the work collectives and among the regional political elite. For more on this see Zabarah 2011: 151-152.

<sup>112</sup> PMSSR is the acronym of the Transnistrian Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

<sup>113</sup> Curiously, as if to signal its tacit support, Moscow did not react to this initial declaration of independence and took no action to recognize the region or deny it recognition (Ozhiganov 1997: 162).

(Ozhiganov 1997: 163). Though these declarations and demands were not acknowledged, their effects were already felt in Chişinău and beyond.

It is crucial to note that Transnistria's tentative steps toward separation occurred in the context of the Soviet Union. Located on the Soviet Union's western border, all Moldovan infrastructure (highways, railways, electricity) transited the PMR. The fact that Transnistria could paralyze the Moldovan economy reinforced a sense of destiny that infused the strike movement. In Transnistria, factories became the initial nodes of authority in an informal network that culminated with a series of strikes in August and September of 1989 that crippled Moldova. Workplace organizing centered on Work Council Collectives, STKs [*sovety trudovyx kollektivov*], an organizational form that emerged from the 1987 "Law on State Enterprises" as a part of *perestroika* reforms. Originally intended to foster democratization in the workplace and increase efficiency, they became part of a wave of strikes that shut down production in over 200 enterprises. At its peak over 100,000 workers participated in the strikes, though their actions ultimately could not negate the half million demonstrators in right-bank Moldova who demanded passage of the language law. Despite their inability to claim success, being able to recall these events is a reminder of the power these memories hold and their collective and individual reluctance to dismiss them along with the PMR. The power structures created during the initial moments of Transnistria's separation remain to this day.<sup>114</sup> The cumulative effects of Soviet development transformed a material assemblage (factories, the workplace) into a source of political authority. These institutions successfully elaborated a sense of difference vis-à-vis Moldova that could later be supplemented by other forms of authority; it is this sense of difference vis-à-vis Moldova that authorizes the polity.

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<sup>114</sup> Igor Smirnov, the former leader of the OSTK strike movement, has been president of the PMR since 1990.

As the Soviet state faltered, left-bank residents began to organize themselves (Mason 2009). With a population that self-identified as Soviet, residents took up the cause of the Russian language and demonstrated against “Romanianization” and unification with Romania. With the onset of competitive elections, Russian-language parties were formed in Transnistria and in other industrialized urban centers in right-bank Moldova. The former PMR Foreign Minister Valery Litskai (2000-2008) recalled Transnistria’s reaction to these events.

We already knew what to expect from the example of the Bălțic States and tried to fight through political methods by creating Russian-language parties, but we were few and our voices in parliament did not have any influence on the adoption of laws.<sup>115</sup>

This lack of recourse forced left-bank activists to seek other sources of legitimacy and authority. Unable to participate fully in politics as the MSSR as it constituted itself on a national basis, they looked to the region’s industrial base for legitimation.<sup>116</sup> Events in Transnistria were not unique in the context of national movements in other titular republics in which elites utilized nationalism to assert control over resources previously controlled by Moscow.<sup>117</sup>

By 1989, two opposed publics had formed in the MSSR. As right-bank Moldova nationalized, non-Moldovans were marginalized and occasionally subject to violence. Though relatively few incidents occurred, the images of people beaten solely because they refused (or were unable) to communicate in Moldovan spread through the media and to this day remain etched in the collective consciousness of left-bank residents.<sup>118</sup> Slogans like “Suitcase, train station, to Russia” and “Russians beyond the Dniester, Jews in the Dniester” indexed the

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<sup>115</sup> Personal interview with former PMR Foreign Minister Valery Litskai, February 19, 2009.

<sup>116</sup> For more on how economic and cultural fields can also generate nationalism, see Verdery 1993.

<sup>117</sup> While central elites in the capitals were arguing for greater control over local resources and the revival of indigenous languages, they were also initiating a policy of centralization within their own republics, attempting to gain control over local party and state institutions that might see Moscow – rather than the republican capitals – as the legitimate locus of authority. These centralization policies prompted their own movements for autonomy and independence within the republics. (King 2000: 185).

<sup>118</sup> Even among informants who held little respect for the PMR as a state were revolted by the mob violence against non-Moldovan speakers in the early 1990s.

potentially destructive violence of nationhood unmoored from its Soviet foundation. These slogans called for the expulsion of occupiers (Soviet officials, equated with Russians) and non-titular nationals (Jews and other minorities). Indirectly, they alluded to Romanian ethnic cleansing in left-bank Moldova during World War II.<sup>119</sup>

Far from welcoming (or even acknowledging) Moldova's diversity, public discourse tended to extremes, shifting from a forced internationalism under the Soviet state to a virulent and occasionally violent nationalism. The tension generated by the undoing of Soviet nationality policy permeated the political spaces opened up by *glasnost*.

After 1989, strikes were organized, all of the big factories of Transnistria held a meeting. They were joined by other large factories in Chişinău and Bălţi. All of these strikes lasted six weeks. The strikes did not change anything, but there appeared a new organ: the United Council of Labor Collectives (OSTK). It recalled the collectives that existed in 1905 before the communist dictatorship. These were the types of organs of authority. In Chişinău, the Communist Party crushed them, and in Transnistria Communist Party had no such power, so OSTK retained their influence. It included the directors and managers of the industrial sector, which led their workers.<sup>120</sup>

This organizational form had its greatest success where the reach of the Moldovan state was weakest: left-bank Moldova. By transforming the internationalist ethos of Soviet industrial culture into a generative foundation, STKs and later the OSTK<sup>121</sup> were able to throw the Communist Party out of power through a strike campaign and local elections. The OSTK claimed an authenticity that the privilege-laden Communist Party could not. By invoking the 1905 workers' collectives, they constructed a genealogy in which they could claim kinship with earlier, purer forms of working class activism. Though they utilized the language and symbols of

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<sup>119</sup> For an overview of Romanian actions in Transnistria during World War II, see Solonari 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Personal interview with former PMR Foreign Minister Valery Litskai, February 19, 2009.

<sup>121</sup> The OSTK decision-making processes mirrored the hierarchical structure common in most Soviet enterprises. These decision-making processes were characterized by the prevalence of coordinated discussions, where crucial decisions were made at the top management level and then communicated to the lower hierarchy. (Zabarah 2011: 156).

Soviet internationalism, they positioned the movement as a corrective to the nepotism and privileges of the Communist party.

At this point it is useful to look at Transnistria and Moldova in the context of a faltering Soviet state. In the late 1980s, political disputes on the Soviet periphery took their cues from disputes in Moscow. The idea that events in Moscow determined the course of local events was invoked to explain why and how things ended up as they did. The genre of the lament (Ries 1997: 83-125) evacuates all agency from the local context and displaces it other distant centers of power. One elderly activist spoke of the failures (to achieve recognition) as resulting from the inability of the center to recognize the dynamics of the situation on the ground. In his narrative, *if only* Gorbachev had recognized that Moldova was conducting genocide against Transnistrians and as a result Russia would have recognized the PMSSR, then everything would have been better. Such a discourse locates agency outside of the polity itself, and allows for contextual circumstances to be viewed as determinant.

In the late 1980s, the Moldovan Communist party was dependent upon pacifying two constituencies: the masses in Chişinău and their supporters in Moscow. Nationalism was as a means of preserving power.

There [in the Soviet Union] everybody was equal. [Among Communist party members] there was no idea of the nation, they fulfilled the orders of Gorbachev, and Gorbachev led a policy of rapprochement with the Popular Front for the power struggle against Legachev and other conservatives of the Communist Party. He [Gorbachev] supported the popular fronts in the Bălŭic states, in Moldova, and in Georgia. Here Luchinski [former first secretary of the Communist Party of Moldova] carried out his instructions, and we were against it. There were two powers: the Communist Party and OSTK, each with their own power. Here [in left-bank Moldova] the Communist Party lost badly back in 1990 [the first free elections]. OSTK concentrated power in their hands and the communists did not have any power, and could not use the army.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Personal interview with former PMR Foreign Minister Valery Litskai, February 19, 2009.

Political struggle was between a protected, insulated elite and the people as elaborated by the OSTK. The former required support from the center, while the latter tapped the productive power of Soviet modernity. By utilizing the basis of material production, and, by extension, belonging, OSTK created a power base to rival to the Communist Party. The means of production literally became factories of authority.

### **Violence and Sovereignty**

The progression of the armed conflict in Transnistria relates directly to the ongoing crisis in the Soviet Union's power structure. After the unsuccessful Moscow coup of August 19, 1991, Moldovan authorities began to assert control over administrative buildings and other infrastructure in left-bank Moldova and arrested separatist leaders for supporting the coup.<sup>123</sup> The coup's failure precipitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and barely a week later, on August 27, 1991, Moldova declared its independence. In response, Transnistrian deputies met and proclaimed that they did not recognize this declaration and affirmed their allegiance to the Soviet Union. Seeking to elaborate a symbolic repertoire worthy of a sovereign state, the PMR adopted the flag and coat of arms of Soviet Moldova as their own and demanded the release of strike leaders arrested by Moldova.<sup>124</sup>

Geographically, Transnistria is relatively narrow but "tall" and boast several hubs along a north-south axis centered on the Dniester River that contains transportation infrastructure, industry, and population centers. The PMR capital of Tiraspol was secure from incursion, but the northern regions of Transnistria were vulnerable and contained much strategic infrastructure:

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<sup>123</sup> The congratulatory telegrams sent by the strike leaders were cited as evidence of their support for the putchists, and for this they were to face charges in Chişinău.

<sup>124</sup> At this time Moldova adopted the Romanian flag and anthem, and even adopted the names and logos of Romanian state institutions. See Ivel 2010.



Rîbnița housed an important steel factory, and Dubăsari boasted a large reservoir and hydroelectric power plant. These cities would be the first sites of armed conflict. On November 2, 1990, under orders from the Moldovan Prime Minister, militia units and volunteer detachments moved into Bender and Rîbnița to establish government control. The resulting clashes killed three and left nine wounded. Transnistria quickly moved to defend itself, and armed volunteers massed in cities of Dubăsari and Grigoriopol. Moldovan forces retreated at this show of strength, and both sides began stockpiling weapons (Ozhiganov 1997: 163-4).

The armed phase of the conflict offered competing forms of institutionalized violence. The conflict took the form of an “undeclared war” between, on the one hand, police forces and volunteer detachments from Moldova facing off against Transnistrian self-defense groups supplemented by the former 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Each of these forces indexed very different means of institutionalized violence. Moldovan police forces were an already constituted power: their actions took place in the context of enforcement, the internal maintenance of established, recognized order and its boundaries. From Transnistria, the image of a people’s militia opens up a political topography in which violence becomes a way of constituting authority or defending against an unjust one. The military might of the Soviet Union supplements and allows for a nascent Transnistrian authority to be realized. As a constituting power, the military typically defends a state’s external borders and has the potential to create states, constitutions, and borders. In the PMR, the intervention of the former Soviet 14<sup>th</sup> army guaranteed the PMR’s *de facto* sovereignty and limits its sovereign competition.

While Russia supports (but refuses to formally recognize) PMR sovereignty, in the realm of charity and foreign aid Russian is the largest provider of aid to the PMR. During recent floods, drought, and an economic blockade, local authorities appealed to Russia for humanitarian aid. In

the case of the 2006 economic blockade (described in chapter four), the arrival of an aid convoy from Russia was a very visible manifestation of public diplomacy. The fact that any and all *visible* aid comes from Russia must be seen within the larger context in which Russia guarantees the PMR's *de facto* sovereignty by limiting potential competitors and their competing claims to sovereignty. The pursuit and defense of a yet-unrecognized sovereignty becomes the basis for a host of other exchange processes (humanitarian aid, charity, cultural diplomacy) that strengthen the idea of Transnistrians as a people under threat. After all, if Transnistria was not threatened and under a blockade, why would Russia send such visible support? Threats to Transnistria can also be ideological (new knowledge or ideas that threaten to upend the status quo) or simply be acts of nature that the PMR and its inhabitants must endure.

The PMR's uncertain and supplemented sovereignty resulted in a visible tension between the constituting and constituted sovereign powers. As a newly independent state Moldova could not monopolize force within its borders, and PMR activists and state-builders seized upon these circumstances to consolidate their control in the region. Gradually, in left-bank Moldova, the existing patchwork of sovereignties was consolidated, though irregularities remained. Certain municipalities remained under PMR control, and law-enforcement agencies under Moldovan jurisdiction. This led to clashes in which villagers faced off against neighbors over what authority to recognize. In this increasingly polarized environment, both sides undertook measures to stabilize the situation: Moldova freed the strike leaders, and both sides withdrew their forces.

### **The 14<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army**

The existence of the PMR as an unrecognized state must be seen in the context of the unique role played by Soviet armed forces and their uncertain role in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In January 1992, Soviet armed forces were facing the most severe crisis since the Russian Civil War and the Nazi invasion. The country they had sworn to protect had collapsed and was being replaced by an ill-defined Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The withdrawal of thirty-four divisions and over a million military personnel and their families was under way; successor states started to nationalize the forces that remained on their territory (Ozhiganov 1997: 179). For officers stationed outside Russia, uncertainty reigned both within the military establishment and on the home front.

Initially 14<sup>th</sup> Army personnel were deployed across a wide swath of Moldova, not only in Transnistria.<sup>125</sup> As a result of demobilization, what remained of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army was concentrated in Tiraspol. As the political uncertainty vis-à-vis Moldova increased, servicemen were less willing to turn over weapons to a political authority they viewed as threatening. Both the Republic of Moldova and the PMR laid claims to the 14<sup>th</sup> army's equipment. While containing only a single division, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army controlled the region's enormous Soviet arms depots. Nearly 80% of its personnel came from Transnistria, including 51% of its officers and 79% of its draftees; most were locals of Ukrainian and Russian nationality (Ozhiganov 1997: 179). Though the 14<sup>th</sup> Army metonymically stands for Russian interference in Moldovan affairs and is cited by Moldovans as evidence of Russian support for separatism, such a view underestimates the threat that Soviet weapons would fall into the hands of irregulars, criminals, or terrorists. As the conflict escalated, Transnistrians armed themselves with the 14<sup>th</sup> army's weapons (Ozhiganov 1997: 175).

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<sup>125</sup> Commonly, the 14th Soviet army is equated with left-bank Moldova when in fact it was dispersed across the territory of the MSSR.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Army was central to this conflict because of its technological superiority and unchallenged position in the region. Its uncertain status and operational mandate in the post-Soviet period conflicted with the local ties of its personnel.<sup>126</sup> While Moldova attempted to create a national army, Transnistrian authorities passed laws that provided protection and offered financial inducements for units stationed in left-bank Moldova. These laws provided guarantees that units stationed in the region would be financed by the PMR and retain their former operational structures.<sup>127</sup> Publicly, military officials did not respond to these declarations, though individual soldiers were induced to switch allegiance. The Russian Federation's involvement in post-1992 peacekeeping operations was focused on preventing the materiel of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army from falling into the hands of PMR forces or criminal elements.<sup>128</sup>

In Moldova, as was the case across the USSR, the weapons and military technology of the Soviet Army became the property of its successor states (in Moldova, the Moldovan army). Logistically this posed a problem, since the equipment was located in Transnistria. Securing these stores was tricky, since each side assumed that any weapons transferred might later be used on them. Given this uncertainty and the need of Moldova to assert its sovereignty within its *de jure* territory, Romania provided military and logistical support. Moldovan police brigades and volunteer units were supplied with small arms, mortars, and armored personnel carriers by Romania. Today, the weapons and the identity documents of Romanian military advisors are displayed in a museum commemorating the "Bender tragedy," the seminal battle of Transnistria's "Great Patriotic War." From the perspective of the PMR, these objects validate

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<sup>126</sup> Initially the 14th Army was under CIS control, then subsequently Russian jurisdiction.

<sup>127</sup> For more on these laws ("On the Defense of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic," "On the Armed Forces," and "On Obligatory National Service in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic"), see Ozhiganov 1997.

<sup>128</sup> Military institutions played a key role in money laundering operations. Unauthorized transfers of arms and equipment also occurred, though information is second-hand. For more on money laundering and illicit economic practices, see chapter 4, particularly the section that looks at the exchange of old Soviet rubles at the Military Field Bank of the 14th Army.

their belief that unification with Romania was imminent. These objects constitute material proof of irredentism and validate their struggle against nationalism.<sup>129</sup>

One finds an interesting paradox when looking at the issues of sovereignty, territory, and recognition within the conflict. Moldova's attempts to assert control over the rebellious left-bank region must be viewed in the context of the breakup of the Soviet Union. Moldova viewed Transnistria's 1990 declaration of independence strictly within the context of the Soviet Union insofar as the PMSSR was intended to become a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist, Moldova sought to assert control over a region formally within its recognized borders. Transnistrians refused to recognize these claims, given that, save the Soviet state, the region had never been administered by any authority since the early 20th century. The fact that Moldova could not control this region encouraged the abstract mass of individuals — a people under threat — to create the means to defend themselves as well as the practical appendages of the state and its associated political assemblage: elections, a history, and the people as the constituent holders of sovereignty. Though a collection of individuals, this mass is manifested through authority figure who, speaking in their name so as to make them a people.<sup>130</sup> In the absence of any durable or stable political frame, representatives of the newly independent Republic of Moldova and the PMR both acted as if they were the rightful sovereigns despite their competing claims.

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<sup>129</sup> The conflict between Transnistria and Moldova coincided with a revival of the Cossack movement. During a December, 1991 meeting of *atamans* conducted under the auspices of the Union of Cossacks, the plight of Transnistrians was explicitly discussed and a statement issued that addressed the "brutal violation of the rights and freedoms of the peoples of Transdnier." (Ozhiganov 1997: 175). This declaration and the arrival of hundreds of Cossack volunteers raised the symbolic profile of the region by highlighting the moral and ethical basis of "defending Russians abroad." Today, Cossacks groups operate militarily under the auspices of the Defense Ministry and run profitable retail businesses in the region.

<sup>130</sup> For the first two decades of PMR statehood, this figure who claimed to speak for the people was Igor Smirnov, active both in the initial strike movements and later as President.

## **From Conflict to War**

In December 1991, clashes between Moldovan police and armed volunteer detachments from Transnistria were centered on the cities of Bender (located in the right-bank but controlled by PMR authorities) and Dubăsari. After a period of mounting tension, March 1992 marked the conflict's escalation and the formation of a militarized front. Until this point casualties were low (less than one hundred overall). Despite this, informants in Tiraspol would tell me that genocide had occurred. Curiously, as if to confirm their fears, the Moldovan President Snegur stated on television in March 1992 that Moldova would not allow the genocide of the Transnistrian population.<sup>131</sup>

With Moldova's independence threatened by the seizure of its transportation, economic, and communications infrastructure, President Snegur declared a state of emergency and introduced direct presidential rule. Moldovan forces attempted to seize Transnistria's lines of communication and isolate the strategically important cities of Tiraspol, Dubăsari, and Rîbnița. Fighting continued on a front that stretched along the Dniester River. The bloodiest battle occurred in June 1992 when Moldovan armed forces, supported by police and volunteer detachments, advanced on the city of Bender with tanks and armored personnel carriers.

These few short days of fighting in Bender resulted in the bulk of casualties for the 1992 conflict. Exact numbers are hard to come by, but the "Battle of Bender" saw over 500 killed, 1,500 wounded, and nearly 80,000 displaced people (OSCE 2002).<sup>132</sup> Moldovan forces bombarded the city with artillery, howitzers, MiG-29 aircraft, helicopters, tanks, mortars, and grenade launchers. The damage to the city and its infrastructure was immense. This battle

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<sup>131</sup> This address was broadcast on March 5th, 1992.

<sup>132</sup> Estimates of those killed during the conflict vary widely. As OSCE background paper, "The Transdnistrian Conflict in Moldova: Origins and Main Issues" estimates that the fighting caused several hundreds of deaths and

became the anchor of an ideology that positions the PMR as the force that, along with the help of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, stopped an impending genocide. Bender subsequently became the central component of an ideological frame that forces the one to acknowledge Moldovan aggression and destruction.<sup>133</sup> Because of its central role in the PMR state-building project, the scars of the battle remain visible throughout the city to this day. The bullet-ridden city hall in Bender is a reminder of what happened nearly two decades ago. It is not uncommon to find small memorial plaques commemorating innocent victims or heroic defenders scattered through the city on pockmarked walls, courtyard gates, or other mundane spaces.<sup>134</sup>

At some point during the fighting near Bender, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's barracks came under fire. Until this point, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army had maintained an official position of neutrality. After coming under attack, they became involved in order to repel a Moldovan advance on Tiraspol. Their involvement must be seen in the context of the aforementioned jurisdictional uncertainties that arose as a result of confusion in Moscow. Many officers came from the region, and non-locals came to regard the region as home. Their feelings of affinity were only heightened when the Soviet Union ceased to exist and Moldovan nationalist forces home besieged their adopted. Militarily, the lack of a clear legal basis for dividing its weapons and property led to a chaotic situation in which weapons were transferred, illegally traded, or seized outright. This was not only the case in Moldova, but across the Soviet Union. Though this military intervention played a key role in allowing the PMR to emerge as a *de facto* sovereign polity, maintaining a facade of sovereignty and democracy requires performance in order to be successful. What follows in subsequent chapters trace the practices that undergird the PMR's performative sovereignty.

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some 100,000 refugees. "Transnistrian Conflict: Origins and Issues," <http://www.osce.org/moldova/42308> Accessed October 10, 2010.

<sup>133</sup> For more on this death and the creation of affect for political purposes, see chapter 3 on bodies.

<sup>134</sup> There is a small memorial museum attached to a local historical museum.

It is worth noting that the remnants of the 14<sup>th</sup> army constituted another sovereign competitor. Before his political career in Russia, General Alexander Lebed, former commander of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army, was known a peacemaker in the PMR. Lebed was sent by Yeltsin's Defense Minister Pavel Grachev to the PMR in June 1992 to make peace and secure the arms of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>135</sup> Lebed quickly gained the confidence of residents who saw him as an authority figure. His fight against crime and corruption in Transnistria brought him into direct conflict with PMR authorities. Though he refused to shed the role of the soldier-peacemaker, Lebed's command over the 14<sup>th</sup> Army and his assertiveness toward a PMR leadership that he saw as fully under the control of criminal elements leads one to believe that, had he chosen so, he could have asserted a more active role in PMR politics. As an unrecognized state, the PMR attracted (and continues to attract) dubious figures with questionable democratic credentials that have come to occupy various posts in the PMR government. The arrival of these questionable individuals led Lebed into open conflict with the ruling PMR elite.

Lebed's tenure in Transnistria marks the beginning of his transformation from soldier to populist politician.<sup>136</sup> Even today, Lebed remains a popular figure in the region despite the fact that his presence has been erased from official histories of the region.<sup>137</sup> Lebed's image as a

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<sup>135</sup> Grachev gained notoriety primarily because of his military incompetence and longstanding allegations of corruption. In the PMR, he was alleged to be involved in a scheme that used the military-field bank of the 14th Army to exchange then-worthless Soviet rubles for Russian rubles. During fieldwork, informants described suitcases, automobiles, and trains full of old Soviet rubles that were converted. Allegedly, Alexander Lebed and Mikhail Bergman (the former commander of the Tiraspol garrison of the 14th Army) tried to halt this illicit scheme but were personally rebuked by Grachev.

<sup>136</sup> For more on Lebed's political career and how his military experience influenced his politics, see Benjamin Lambeth, *The Warrior Who Would Rule Russia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1996); Lyndon Allin n.d., 'Before the Fall: Aleksandr Lebed's Life and Times Through June 1995'; Harold Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin: Alexander Lebed, Power and Illusion* (London: Little Brown, 1999), and Alexander Lebed, *My Life and My Country* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1997).

<sup>137</sup> Lebed has no memorial in the PMR despite being responsible for bringing peace to the region. Given the PMR authorities' penchant for monuments and commemorative plaques, Lebed's absence is telling. In October, 2010, PMR President Igor Smirnov unveiled a memorial plaque honoring Karl Friedrich Hieronymus, Freiherr von Münchhausen. The plaque was unveiled in the Turkish fortress located in the PMR city of Bender. <http://www.nr2.ru/pmr/303869.html>



strongman in Russia was premised on the idea that he was the only individual capable of stamping out corruption and imposing order in Russia during the chaotic 1990s.<sup>138</sup> Lebed was elected to the PMR Supreme Soviet (legislature) in 1993, and he resigned a month later when his attempts to investigate the participation of PMR military forces in the 1993 constitutional crisis were thwarted.<sup>139</sup> After leaving Tiraspol, Lebed was appointed by Boris Yeltsin as Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Lebed was integral in ending the First Chechen War in August of 1996, yet Yeltsin promptly fired him in October 1996 for criticizing the Russian army's tactics in the conflict. Lebed subsequently placed third in the 1996 Russian Presidential elections with nearly 15% of the vote, and in 1998 he became governor of the mineral-rich Krasnoyarsk region. He died in a helicopter crash in 2002.

Armed conflict with Moldova (the “undeclared war”) allowed the PMR elite to consolidate their position in the region. Subsequently, idea of the PMR state as the protector of the people became the central tenet in the political discourse of an increasingly militarized society. Even today, contradictory positions are equated with being a traitor to those who had shed their blood. The PMR's status as an unrecognized state (and its detachment from the international community) allowed for the emergence of a siege mentality and enabled the ruling political elite to build up a clear-cut concept of the enemy (Schmitt 2007). By creating the image of a region besieged by hostile forces, elites were able to strengthen an already existing local identity as Transnistrians separate and distinct from Moldova. After armed conflict, living together in a single state was seen as impossible. The PMR elite has, through referendums, a national narrative of victimization, a cult of those killed, created a system in which

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<sup>138</sup> One of Lebed's 1996 campaign posters directly references his tenure in the PMR: “I have already stopped one war.”

disengagement from Moldova became the basis for a separate political system and economy that has developed its own dynamics after twenty years of separation.

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<sup>139</sup> Lebed was investigating the use of PMR forces to support the coup attempt against Boris Yeltsin. Parliament had voted to impeach Yeltsin and install then Vice President Alexander Rutskoy as President. Rutskoy is a frequent visitor to the PMR and guest of former President Smirnov.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CREATING A PEOPLE: REFERENDA, NOSTALGIA, AND SUBJECTIVITY

The word referendum denotes the process of subjecting an important political question to a decision of the people through a vote (Oxford English Dictionary). Its Latin etymology, “that which must be referred,” or literally, “thing brought back,” alludes to its predetermined contours and its constructed nature. In the PMR, the issues subjected to referendum date to the Soviet period with the creation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) in 1924.<sup>140</sup> To create the MSSR, a Moldovan people and culture needed to be conjured up.<sup>141</sup> Convincing Moldovans that they constituted a separate people from Romanians required creating the requisite accoutrements of a national culture. This national culture that created a nation in the context of the Soviet state became contested in the late 1980s as questions emerged about what constituted the borders, legitimate or not, of the peoples and languages of the MSSR.

Referenda address issues requiring a decision of the electorate, with their subject matter divided into categories such as constitutional issues (especially after a revolution or territorial breakup); territorial issues (issues of secession or federation); moral issues (abortion, divorce, drug policy, etc.) and local, parochial issues (e.g., school funding or bond issues) (Magleby

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<sup>140</sup> The initial issues were cultural, and included deciding whether Moldovan should be written in Cyrillic, and whether to accept the state symbols of Moldova, at the time identical to Romania.

<sup>141</sup> Hirsch (2005: 224) describes the difficult Soviet ethnographers had when working on a small exhibit on Soviet Moldavia in 1932/1933: “The department’s ethnographers debated, without total resolution, how best to depict the Soviet Moldavians versus the Romanian Bessarabians. These peoples derived from the same ethnic group; but while the Romanian Bessarabians had attained nationhood under capitalism, the Soviet Moldavians had attained nationhood under socialism.” Taking a more geopolitical tack, Martin (2001: 274-275) sees the Piedmont principle – exploiting cross-border ethnic ties to project Soviet influence into neighboring states – as being the determining factor in the formation of the MSSR. “In one exceptional case, the Piedmont Principle was even the primary motivation for the formation of a national republic: the Moldavian ASSR. The Soviet Union never recognized Romania’s annexation of the Tsarist province of Bessarabia.”

2001). Often the right to referenda is enshrined in the constitution, as is the case in Switzerland, where citizens can call for a referendum on constitutional amendments and on laws passed by the legislature. Similarly, in California, the signatures of 5% (for a statute) or 8% (for a constitutional amendment) of the electorate are required for a statewide referendum.

Typically, referenda are held by existing political entities to make collective decisions about the management of their affairs. Despite its portrayal as a “totalitarian” state, the Soviet Union centralized citizens’ participation in governance. Article 48 of the 1977 Soviet constitution enshrined the right of citizens to take part in the management of the state:

**Article 48.** Citizens of the USSR have the right to take part in the management and administration of state and public affairs and in the discussion and adoption of laws and measures of All-Union and local significance.

This right is ensured by the opportunity to vote and to be elected to Soviets of People's Deputies and other elective state bodies, to take part in nationwide discussions and referenda, in people's control, in the work of state bodies, public organizations, and local community groups, and in meetings at places of work or residence.<sup>142</sup>

Though the right to hold referenda was guaranteed by the Soviet constitution, with the exception of the March 1991 referendum that marked its demise no others were ever held in the Soviet Union. The USSR’s first and last referendum posed a question that reverberates to this day:

Do you consider necessary the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a renewed federation of equal sovereign republics in which the rights and freedom of an individual of any nationality will be fully guaranteed?

Despite being boycotted in Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova, at least 70% voted “yes” in participating republics.<sup>143</sup> The referendum took place in Transnistria, where a majority voted to preserve the USSR. Curiously, the 1991 Soviet referendum was not

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<sup>142</sup> "Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," adopted at the Seventh (Special) Session of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, October 7, 1977. <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons02.html> Accessed September 20, 2011.

<sup>143</sup> In Georgia, the referendum took place and passed in the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Moldova, the referendum overwhelmingly passed in Transnistria and Gagauzia.

Transnistria's first. Left-bank residents had previously voted, in a series of referenda, to create their own Soviet republic outside of the MSSR, the PMSSR.<sup>144</sup>

The PMR's referenda occurred as the once powerful Soviet state dissolved and was replaced with national states, some of which were of unsettled geopolitical provenance. The events in the PMR raise the question of exactly who has the right to initiate a referendum. Is simply organizing a referendum a sufficient basis for it to be deemed valid? Can referenda be legitimately used to replace the authority of one state (albeit a disintegrating one) with an unrecognized polity one? Finally, what productive "work" can referenda perform in the context of non-recognition?

The fact that left-bank residents utilized an amendment from the Soviet constitution shortly before its demise remains a deft act of political subterfuge. These initial referenda transformed an object that only existed in a virtual form (in the sense that it never had a complement in reality) into tangible form. Having taken an amendment enshrined in Soviet law but never utilized, left-bank activists took a wedge issue common in many republics (language and cultural rights), welded it to the very real issues of political and economic security, and subjected it to the will of the people. Once embossed with the patina of democracy, the results become unimpeachable insofar as the people had spoken "democratically." These actions constitute the core of a democratic mythologem that can be opposed to any number of conflicting discourses.

The origin of political authority in the PMR begins with the creation a constituent people legitimated through referenda. In Transnistria, the plebiscite is an act around which other issues cluster. Referenda offered a means to invoke the constituent unit of popular sovereignty, the

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<sup>144</sup> The Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) was originally conceived of as new Soviet republic separate from the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic.

people [*narod*]. Building upon the idea that sovereignty and political authority are the products of human creation, I argue in this chapter that referenda perform two vital functions for the PMR state: (1) referenda productively create and materialize the will of the people as the constituent holders of sovereignty and (2) perform important representative functions at the level of spectacle. In the PMR, the referendum is an institution that, along with the 1992 conflict, constitutes the primary means of creating a political authority authorized by its constituents and residents. In the context of Transnistria's liminality-at-large, referenda are a means of mediation, a way of linking different temporalities, communities, and experiences. As part of a local political cosmology, referenda function as messages both to local constituencies and to the outside world. Referenda embody a more pervasive "social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord 1994: 12). Agamben (2011) discusses the ceremonial aspects of governance that lie at the heart of democracy.

Contemporary democracy is a democracy that is entirely founded upon glory, that is, on the efficacy of acclamation, multiplied and disseminated by the media beyond all imagination. (That the Greek term for glory — *doxa* — is the same term that today designates public opinion is, from this standpoint, something more than a coincidence). As had always been the case in profane and ecclesiastical liturgies, this supposedly "originary democratic phenomenon" is once again caught, oriented, and manipulated in the forms and according to the strategies of spectacular power (Agamben 2011: 256).

When faced with the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union, left-bank residents sought a means to legitimize the PMR as a polity. This idea of the PMR as a separate polity was initially the idea of a devoted few who had much to lose in an independent Moldova. Legitimacy required not only creating the institutional components of a state, but also their representative and ideological forms. Given the PMR's lack of recognition, local elites have legitimized the PMR state through referenda, which are locally seen as a purer form of democracy (i.e., more direct in comparison to the United States and Europe).

## Referenda, Simulation, and Virtuality

As Transnistria moved to secede from Soviet Moldova (MSSR) after the passage of 1989 language law, left-bank soviets (councils) sought a popular mandate for their actions. Left-bank political structures<sup>145</sup> claimed a mandate through a referendum campaign. From late 1989 to early 1990, a series of local referenda were held on the creation of a separate state in left-bank Moldova; whether to use the Cyrillic or Latin script for the Moldovan language; and whether or not to accept the new Moldovan flag and state symbols. These symbolic and orthographic distinctions created disagreement at practical and perceptual levels that remain to this day. Referenda offer a means of differentiation: residents cite the fact that issues decided by legislative fiat in right-bank Moldova were subject to a referendum in Transnistria. In this logic one can notice the contours of a polity authorized by constituents. This line of thinking is vital to the official narrative of the PMR as a state worthy of recognition: the people spoke democratically, Moldova attacked us — the bodies prove this — and the will of the people confirmed our decision to separate.

In the context of the late 1980s, referenda constituted acts of defiance in and of themselves insofar as authorities in Chișinău declared them illegal and nullified the results.<sup>146</sup> This lack of acknowledgement did not discourage left-bank residents. Once a referendum occurred, its results became objective facts and the embodiment of the will of the people. The initial referendum campaign in left-bank Moldova conflated linguistic issues (whether Moldovan and Romanian constituted separate languages), orthographic issues (Cyrillic or Latin) and

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<sup>145</sup> In Transnistria, the most active were city and raion soviets. The term “Soviet” referred to local governmental bodies, the English equivalent being city or regional councils.

<sup>146</sup> Lieven (1998: 248-249) writes that the bases for Transnistrian secession were laid while the USSR still existed, with officials in Moscow having direct points of bureaucratic contact with and even control over local officials and managers by means of (power of patronage and reward). Furthermore, since it began in Soviet times, it was protected from police and military retaliation by the Moldovan government, which only belatedly realized its threat and potential for disrupting the establishment of Moldovan sovereignty.

political issues (whether or not to form their own state to protect their rights) into a participatory ritual that came to embody the will of the people. This initial referendum and subsequent referenda constitute, along with the 1992 war, an experiential foundation for the PMR as a polity.

The initial referenda took a series of geopolitical issues and used them as a means of cleaving off a political community. The issue of whether or not the borders of the Republic of Moldova encompassed the Moldovan people, the Romanian people, or all individuals residing there became a means of creating a political community in which left-bank residents would explicitly belong. In the process of affirming their differences, left-bank residents would, in addition to their ascribed nationalities as Moldovans, Russians, or Ukrainians, become Transnistrians, a multi-national *narod*<sup>147</sup> created through the cumulative effects of Soviet power (Mason 2009). By translating a series of collective decisions into an explicitly political language, referenda created the preconditions for belonging and became the basis for a state. Through participation and the subsequent elaboration of a Transnistrian political narrative, referenda create meaningful subject positions and points of identification for individuals who, left with the material and symbolic forms of the Soviet Union, faced an uncertain future.

Alongside referenda, one finds the development of a distinct PMR political lexicon based around the ideas of direct democracy and grassroots participation that adds to the idea of the region and its inhabitants as separate from Moldova. Historical ambiguity and subjective interpretations became, via referenda, the undisputable will of the Transnistrian *narod*. Insofar as their results become contested objects in ongoing political rituals between the PMR and Moldova, referenda enjoy unparalleled support within the PMR. Referenda index Transnistrian

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<sup>147</sup> The term *narod* can mean people, folk, or nation (in the sense of a unit of legitimate sovereignty), thought it typically implies a connection to the people that is lacking in more technical terms like *natsiia* or *ethnos*. I leave it untranslated throughout the work. In Transnistria, the term is typically used to describe the constituent holders of sovereignty, the “people” - it is typically devoid of any ethnic component.



citizens as the constituent elements of a legitimate popular sovereignty. Having affirmed their right to separate, residents could now begin to form a political structure to defend themselves. The bloodshed of 1992 further implicates residents in the state-building process, for it was the region's residents, citizens, and soldiers who died defending the PMR. To concede and endorse Moldovan "nationalism" and "chauvinism" would negate sacrifices measured in blood and forsake the ideals of the Soviet Union.

Referenda function as a stabilizing force in the face of an uncertain political future. The changing topics of referenda and of democracy remind me of Evans-Pritchard's dictum that "new situations demand new magic" (1937: 513). When confronted with an uncertain geopolitical context, referenda create experientially valid and accessible means of ordering and making sense of reality. Referenda are part of a distinctly Slavic genealogy of democracy that does not bind them to any normative, Western constraints.

Referenda constituted a means of engaging themselves politically while disengaging from Moldova. During an interview with the PMR foreign minister Vladimir Yastrebnchak in 2009, I asked him to describe Transnistria to someone previously unaware of what Transnistria is.<sup>148</sup> His answer alludes to the circularity of the PMR's existence as a polity.

Transnistria is a narrow strip of land on which live people who have showed a remarkable ability for self-organization. Having rose up to defend their rights, they were able to assert/defend them. And this is enough so that other peoples also respect the rights of Transnistrians.<sup>149</sup>

Yastrebnchak's description highlights Transnistria's capacity of self-organization and defense: the people living on this particular piece of land have a remarkable ability for self-organization, which they exercised by defending their rights, and this in and of itself should be sufficient for

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<sup>148</sup> My exact question asked him to explain what *Pridnestrovo* was. This Russian term is slightly different from Transnistria. See my discussion of this in the introduction, footnote 1.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with PMR Foreign Minister Vladimir Ystrebnchak, July 2009.

others to respect their rights. His words illustrate how referenda offer residents a means of participating and reflecting on the events that led to the creation of the PMR. Imparting this to others is a strategic goal, for while residents know what the PMR is, the world remains willfully ignorant of the reality of PMR statehood.

As a developmental state, the Soviet Union was organized around production and redistribution (Verdery 1996, Kornai 1992). With the PMR, production (along with consumption and distribution) has shifted from the material plane to an abstract one in which images and sentiments of harmony and plenitude dominate. In the PMR, political life is based on the logic of simulation. Unlike production, which operates within finite realms and constraints, simulations can be indefinitely replayed.<sup>150</sup> Referenda and other sovereign performances can be reiterated and replayed in numerous contexts, subject as they are to a “social demand” (Baudrillard 1994: 26). Referenda are a calculated means of measuring and codifying the will of the people, which in turn became the basis for a movement that grew into a state with real effects, institutions, and power. Despite its non-recognition, PMR performances of sovereignty generate a sense of belonging as well as a nascent platform for power and authority. This idea of sovereignty as a performance is a distinctly modern phenomenon, since before the onset of modernity sovereigns did not necessarily need a people, since the King enjoyed sovereignty by the grace of God alone.

Whether one speaks of the *narod* who emerged through action direct action or of the PMR’s democratic origins, what was essentially a performance for its own purposes became a meaningful experiential and phenomenological frame for residents. Though a single event, a referendum is capable of generating effects well in the future. As if to prove its lasting effects, a

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<sup>150</sup> A simulation [...] can go on indefinitely, since - unlike ‘true’ power which is, or was, a structure, a strategy, a relation of force, a stake - this is nothing but the object of a social *demand*, and hence subject to the law of supply and demand, rather than to violence and death. Completely expunged from the *political* dimension, it is dependent,

few informants spontaneously produce their old Soviet passports and showed me the stamp indicating that they had voted in a referendum — participation physically inscribes one's participation in political life.

### **The Local Genealogy of Referenda**

*Democracy is a concept that does not disappear from the field of vision of the media, of scientists or of politicians. It would be nice, of course, to avoid its disappearance from the actual practice of public administration, and most importantly, from the minds of the citizens themselves, since democracy remains an empty phrase without mass support, without becoming a perceived need of man and citizen. ... The institutions of democracy are diverse, and include participation in elections, participation in the discussion of important bills, and participation in referenda.*

Anna Volkova

According to official PMR historiography, the region's current state of affairs is the result of processes that date back thousands of years.<sup>151</sup> These *longue durée* processes, coupled with the region's existence on the borders of competing religions, empires, and "civilizations" only adds to its unique genealogy.<sup>152</sup> The idea of the PMR as a place that defies precedent and eludes easy characterization is ceaselessly reiterated by individuals and in local media. The wider context in which referenda take place is the result of a selective reading of events and not the result of world-historic forces that created the sovereign Transnistrian *narod*.

In the introduction to her book *Referenda in the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic (1989-2003)*, Anna Volkova locates a historical analogue of the referendum in the medieval Slavic

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like any other commodity, on production and mass consumption. Its spark has disappeared – only the fiction of a political universe is saved. (Baudrillard 1994: 46).

<sup>151</sup> For more on the notion of the Transnistrian people as the result of a creative endeavor in historiography, see Solonari 2003.

<sup>152</sup> This "civilizations" argument is based on the idea that Transnistria has historically been a border between competing empires, nations, and civilizations. This stretches back into antiquity, when the region was a borderland between Dacia and Scythia. In the 13th century, the region was briefly under Mongol control and subsequently part of the Crimean Khanate. It was alternately part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Ottoman Empire, and later Imperial Russia.

world.<sup>153</sup> The numerous referenda in the PMR are the modern forms of medieval institutions like the *veche*, a popular assembly that took root in Slavic lands from 10<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Volkova 2005: 5). Rooted in the Slavic gatherings, the *veche* was where important questions were discussed, where issues of war and peace were settled, and leaders were chosen.<sup>154</sup> Despite its disappearance, the spirit of the *veche* survived in the form of village gatherings that allowed for “freedom-loving Slavic souls remained unshaken” (Volkova 2005: 5). These gatherings survived the Russian civil war and endured in the Soviet period, where they existed without control “from above.” And just as an institution like the *veche* can prosper without control “from above,” referenda can too.

In the PMR, referenda are constitutive and form the basis for the PMR. Volkova anticipates criticism of referenda as the basis for creating a political constituency. “Many experts have expressed the view that we can not allow a referendum to replace the institutions of political representation” (Volkova 2005: 7). She continues,

[Such a view holds only if one] ... considers the issue in terms of the stable existence of the state. And if the government collapses, and citizens are forced to take the initiative just to maintain a stable existence for their families, to protect the basic rights and freedoms? Does the priority of a referendum in the face of inaction by "people's representatives" who do not want to fulfill the will of their voters? Such referenda are the greatest acts of civic responsibility, a testimony to the direct participation of citizens in the affairs of government, direct democracy. Such referenda, the initiative for which was truly popular, led to the formation of Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. The actuality of the referenda in the PMR is not in doubt. The fifteen-year history of our state is connected with referenda – they have become integral part of public life in Transnistria (Volkova 2005: 7).

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<sup>153</sup> The author, Anna Volkova, has been a trusted advisor of PMR President Igor Smirnov since the early 1990s. Before getting involved in politics, she was trained as a historian.

<sup>154</sup> The *veche* and the institutions of a proto-Slavic democracy could not continue unabated. The *veche* was liquidated when Novgorod and Pskov joined together to form the Grand Duchy of Moscow in the 15th century. In other medieval regions, the sovereign co-opted such legislative institutions as their own subservient parliaments as they were often framed as given to the people by the king. What is given can be taken away, particularly in light of the sovereign as the giver.

State collapse, “people’s representatives” who do not fulfill their constituents’ will, and a desire for stability required action. The difficulties experienced by left-bank residents do not allow for referenda as supplement to an existing polity. For the PMR, the referenda *are* democracy and form the legal, historical, and experiential basis for the PMR as a state.

The need to hold referenda emerged in response to the lack of a titular nationality in the region.<sup>155</sup> One PMR historian, after speaking in generalities about Transnistria as a border between civilizations, highlighted the uniqueness of the region. Transnistria, he intoned, is a region where three Orthodox peoples (Moldovan, Ukrainian, Russian) coexist without ethnic conflict.<sup>156</sup> Autochthony is not a question of singularities, but of a mix of peoples who have lived on the land for centuries – “we, the masters of this land, indigenous.” His use of the first person plural form was never followed by a specific nationality but by “we, Transnistrians” [*my pridnestrovtsy*]. This elevation of the first person plural effaces the role of the PMR elite in directing the state-building process and develops the idea of Transnistrian as a nascent (non-)national identity.

Left-bank residents cite Moldova’s lack of even a single referendum as a way of positioning Moldova as a state that thwarts the will of its people. One left-bank resident recalled an incident in which he was told by a Moldovan official in 1989 that the “people should work in the fields, and the intelligentsia [should] make laws.” Such a statement allows for a comparison: Transnistria practiced democracy without control, while Moldovan democracy was directed “from above.” The fact that Moldova never had a single referendum becomes, retroactively, an

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<sup>155</sup> This idea of fundamental differences between left-bank Moldova and right-bank Moldova transcended ethnic or national grounds. Moldovans make up the largest minority group in the PMR today, and many Moldovans died fighting forces loyal to the Republic of Moldova in 1992.

<sup>156</sup> Interestingly enough, he later revised his “no conflict” thesis and told me that it was quiet only up until the Russian civil war.

indication of guilt. Holding a referendum could have averted conflict: *they* (Chişinău) should have “asked the people” when deciding important national issues.

The failure to hold a referendum in Moldova was not lost on its own leaders.<sup>157</sup> During an interview with former Prime Minister (2001-2008) Vasile Tarlev, he spoke at length of missteps that occurred as Moldova awkwardly realized its independence

The political forces that came to power in Moldova did not know how to properly handle the situation. I have many friends, colleagues, and relatives from Dubăsari [a city in the PMR], from the Transnistria region. Nobody taught them to make this conflict. It started from these language problems. Honestly, the language question still has not been solved. The younger generation speaks Romanian, bureaucrats speak the state language [*limba de stat*], and the older generation speaks Moldovan. They need to have a referendum, to get the opinion of the people ... that is democracy.<sup>158</sup>

While there is some posturing in his statement, he echoes the sentiments of many in left-bank Moldova. Aware of the confluence of material interests and knowledge production, Tarlev ended the exchange by noting, “scientists say different things depending on who pays them.”

### **Topics of Referenda**

In the PMR, the topics of referenda directly relate to the region’s still unresolved status. Since 1989, there have been seven referenda in the PMR. The first three referenda directly addressed the question of the region’s political status in the context of the demise of the USSR. The first referendum on the formation of the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (PMSSR) was actually a series of referenda that took place in left-bank Moldova from December 1989 through November 1990. Turnout was 79%, with nearly 96% voting in favor of the

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<sup>157</sup> All of Moldova’s presidents, with the exception of the current acting-president Mihai Gimpu, were once members of the Central Committee of the Communist party. Unlike Transnistria, where party bureaucrats and politicians were largely discredited and lost power, in Moldova there was no rejection of the party, which initially attempted to use nationalism to extend its rule.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Vasile Tarlev, May 11, 2009. Tarlev’s political party, the Centrist Union of Moldova, had received only 2.75% of votes in the April 5, 2009 parliamentary elections. Despite not being a member of the Party

creation of the PMSSR as a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. The second referendum (March 1991) asked about the retention of the Soviet Union in a reformed form. Boycotted in right-bank Moldova, left-bank residents overwhelmingly supported the retention of a renewed USSR. The third referendum (December 1, 1991) affirmed the formal independence of the now-renamed Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) outside the Soviet Union (voter turnout was 78%, and nearly 98% voted in favor of full independence).

Having affirmed its right to exist as a polity, the next three referendums addressed internal concerns. The fourth referendum (March 26, 1995) asked about maintaining the permanence presence of the remaining troops from the former 14th Russian Army. More than 90% supported the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria.<sup>159</sup> Though non-binding, this success of this referendum provided a pretext for the PMR and the Russian Federation to insist on an ongoing military presence in the region. The fifth referendum (December 24, 1995) dealt with the approval of the PMR's 1995 Constitution and with accession to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); 81.8% approved the new constitution, and nearly 91% voted in favor of requesting entry to the CIS. As an organization consisting of the recognized successor states of the Soviet Union, the PMR had little chance of joining the CIS. The sixth (April 6, 2003) referendum on private land ownership was invalid, as voter turnout was less than the 50% required by law.

The seventh and most recent referendum — dubbed the “second independence referendum” — was held on September 17, 2006 to great fanfare. Voter turnout was 79%, and the referendum asked two questions:

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of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, Tarlev served under the administration of Vladimir Voronin, who was both President of the Republic of Moldova and the party's leader.

<sup>159</sup> As I argue throughout this dissertation, the presence of Russian troops in left-bank Moldova forecloses any other sovereign competition.

(1): Do you support the course towards the independence of the PMR and the subsequent free association with the Russian Federation? [Yes: 97.2%, No: 1.9%, Invalid/undecided: 0.9%]

(2): Do you consider it possible to renounce the independence of the PMR and subsequently become part of the Republic of Moldova? [Yes: 3.3%, No: 94.9%, Invalid/undecided: 1.8%]<sup>160</sup>

The PMR's official press agency published the findings of a team of international observers who declared the referendum occurred according to European standards.<sup>161</sup> The first question affirmed the independence of the PMR along with the subsequent "free association" with Russia while the second asked about renouncing the independence of the PMR (itself the subject of the first question) and becoming a part of Moldova.

The first and most recent referenda were preceded by large public information campaigns to raise awareness among the electorate. As the first referendum (1989-1990) came closer to being realized, its topics were discussed in the local media. The preliminary draft published in the local newspaper asked residents four questions: (1) about creating an autonomous republic within the MSSR; (2) about creating a bicameral legislative system in the Supreme Soviet of the MSSR; (3) about the equality of the Moldovan and Russian languages; and (4) about the transition to the Latin script (Volkova 2005: 27-28). The last question about the Latin script was to be the concern of only citizens of the Moldovan nationality, not all residents.<sup>162</sup> The broad concerns of the referendum – autonomy, legislative power, language equality, and orthography – all but assured support. For some, the referendum is about control of resources while for others it

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<sup>160</sup> Olvia Press, September 26, 2006. "ЦЕНТРИЗБИРКОМ ПМР ОБНАРОДОВАЛ ОКОНЧАТЕЛЬНЫЕ ИТОГИ РЕФЕРЕНДУМА" (Central Election Committee of the PMR issued the final results of the referendum). <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol225-09-06.htm> Accessed July 5, 2010.

<sup>161</sup> Olvia Press, September 18, 2006. «ТО, ЧТО МЫ УВИДЕЛИ В ПРИДНЕСТРОВЬЕ, СООТВЕТСТВУЕТ САМЫМ ВЫСОКИМ СТАНДАРТАМ ЕВРОПЫ» – ГРУППА МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ НАБЛЮДАТЕЛЕЙ ("What we saw in Transnistria met the highest standards of Europe" – Group of International Observers). <http://www.olvia.idknet.com/ol162-09-06.htm> Accessed July 5, 2010.

<sup>162</sup> This question of orthography has expanded and now occupies a central place in PMR political discourse insofar as Moldova as a nation and a culture is imminently threatened by Romanian annexation and cultural domination.



is about who has the power to make laws. Some are concerned about the loss of Russian as the official language of the MSSR, while others are concerned with orthography. Each issue had its own devoted constituency.<sup>163</sup> Each question built upon an expansive internationalist label that could be opposed to nationalism. Above all, the internationalist platform united a diverse group that sought to preserve the economic gains of the USSR (Mason 2009: 165).

The idea of creating a separate republic on the left-bank can be traced back to the 1924 founding of the MASSR. With the formation of the MSSR in 1940, the “state autonomy” of the MASSR was liquidated (Volkova 2005: 28). The restoration of this sovereignty is central to the PMR’s *raison d’être*. The MASSR was created for propaganda purposes, to spread the revolution to neighboring Romania (Martin 2001: 36). With its capital Chişinău “temporarily-occupied,” Tiraspol became the MASSR’s provisional capital pending the liberation of Bessarabia. Officials in the MASSR even left the streetlights on in Tiraspol day and night to showcase the luminous brilliance of the Soviet project.<sup>164</sup>

The genealogical linkage of the PMR to the MASSR is contrasted to the MSSR in which Moldovans were the titular nationality. An article from a local newspaper, *Dnestrovskaya Pravda* adds the weight of history to this opposition.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Curiously, those who did not speak Moldovan tended to play up the language issue, vigorously defending a language foreign to them.

<sup>164</sup> King, *The Moldovans*, 55-56. In a similar vein, Figes (1996: 42-45) uses the experiences of the governor of Bessarabia, Sergei Urusov, who was appointed in 1903, to show the dynamics of peripheral rule in Imperial Russia. Upon arriving at first major town, Bender (located in the PMR), the Governor was greeted on the platform with a full orchestra. The Vice-Governor came bearing bread and salt, and he was later drawn through Chişinău (Kishinev) in an open carriage by six white horses, with some in the crowd going down on their knees. Yet down the hill from his official residence, he encountered shanty towns, pigs and cows grazing in the unpaved alleys, and open sewers and piles of garbage. Cholera epidemics occurred every three years. “These were the two faces of every Russian city: the one of imperial power and European civilization, the other of poverty and squalor of Asiatic proportions” (Figes 1996: 43). Tellingly, the subheading for this section is entitled “The Thin Veneer of Civilization.”

<sup>165</sup> *Dnestrovskaya Pravda* v. 122, October 12, 1989.

The political rationale for the establishment of the Transnistrian Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in part reads as follows: As part of the autonomous republic from 1924 to 1940, the Transnistrian region formed their own traditions in political, economic and social life. The republic was called Moldavian [MASSR]. This was a tribute to the Moldovan people, who at the time did not have their own national-territorial entity on the territory of the USSR, although the size of the Moldovan population, either now or then, did not exceed 30 percent. Fate decreed that in 1940, as a result the reunification of Bessarabia with the Soviet Union, the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic was formed. It its composition entered the territory of the autonomous republic, whose state independence was not preserved in the MSSR ... on the territory of the former autonomous republic an international community of people now lives, whose outstanding feature is many mixed marriages. Census data on ethnic grounds here has long been conditional. That is, it must be concluded that a defined nation consisting of various different ethnic communities was founded, with a large stratum superficially divided along ethnic grounds. This explains one of our demands, namely to write in our passports, in the fifth column [where one's nationality was written], citizen of the USSR (Volkova 2005: 28).

The titular nation of the PMR is the multiethnic Soviet nation, the cumulative product of "mixed marriages" and internationalist sentiment. Their statehood liquidated in 1940, this "international" community attempts to organize an autonomous Soviet republic. In the original Russian text, the newspaper uses the calque "international" instead of its more literal form, *mezhdunarodnyi*. This use of the calque suggests that that even at this early stage the norms of international relations had permeated the PMR's self-presentation: now largely unburdened by Soviet communism and the constraints of socialism, elites could gradually co-opt its socialist vocabulary for their own nefarious purposes. This proposed republic, unlike the original 1924 republic named to honor the Moldovan people, would be created on the basis of geography and for the "international community" it encompassed. Its struggle for recognition is rooted in history, experience, and anxieties that emerged as the Soviet Union dissolved. The cumulative effects of Soviet development are effaced as the *narod* become active historical agents.

Referenda present abstract concerns in comprehensible forms. By crafting a political lexicon in which opponents are seen as chauvinists at best, fascists at worst, the organizers

controlled the terms of the debate. Volkova chronicles an exchange that took place during a roundtable discussion in Tiraspol (October 15, 1989) with local residents, journalists, and intellectuals from Moldovan Academy of Sciences in attendance. At this point the situation had reached "crisis" proportions, with seemingly no plausible alternatives to an autonomous republic (Volkova 2005: 30, 31). During the roundtable, a representative from the academy of sciences intoned that the idea of restoring autonomy was against the constitution of the MSSR, whose formation automatically liquidated all autonomous republics on its territory — Soviet law provided no basis for forming an autonomous republic. Volkova's narrative positions Soviet bureaucracy as thwarting their grassroots efforts and positions the PMR as a corrective. After citing arguments both for and against the idea of autonomy, Volkova adds that, "by the way, they did not invite opponents from the OSTK."<sup>166</sup> Those who disagreed could not even participate.

Exclusion and marginalization remained powerful tropes for left-bank residents. A series of appeals printed in a local newspaper, *Trudovoy Tiraspol*, opposed the results of a local referendum to decisions made by the Moldovan Supreme Soviet in Chişinău.

As is known, the decision of the Supreme Soviet of the republic did not meet our hopes. The Supreme Soviet not only did not listen to the opinion of 80,000 Tiraspol residents who expressed their opinion in a city-wide poll, but did not even deign to reflect in its decisions on the main provisions of the platform of the CPSU for nationality policy under the contemporary conditions. (cited in Volkova, 2005: 38-39).

Far from discouraging left-bank residents, this lack of acknowledgment set in motion an agitation campaign that sought to rectify the concerns that the Supreme Soviet would not.

OSTK printed up 200,000 copies of a bulletin about the referendum and distributed them to regional work collectives and factories. The rise of the OSTK as a force in organizing referenda transformed the organization into a broad-based movement. As the referenda continued

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<sup>166</sup> OSTK's leader, Igor Smirnov became the president of the PMR, a position he held until December 2011. Anna Volkova was one of Smirnov's closest advisors.

and Moldovan authorities ignored their results, the terms of the conflict shifted. "They [the referenda] demonstrated the willingness of the people to free expression, to the possibility of independently influencing state policy, and thus determining their own destiny and the destiny of their loved ones" (Volkova 2005: 45). It was no longer about making disagreement known.

For left-bank residents, referenda created a mandate to oppose moves taken by Chişinău.<sup>167</sup> The subsequent strike campaign (August and September 1989) that crippled the MSSR (organized by OSTK) became the basis for the 1990 elections in the MSSR that further set Chişinău and Tiraspol in opposition (Mason 2009). With fears of Romanian reunification looming and the Transnistrian *narod* asserting itself democratically through referenda, the question of exactly who was separating from what became a matter of perspective.

Today, referenda are invoked as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with a stalled path for recognition. During an interview with an academic at a local university, we were discussing an ongoing (2009) conflict between the PMR legislature and its president. Many of the same organizations from 1989 had mobilized once again (though with significantly less support) for the purposes of defending Transnistria's long-ruling president against a legislature composed largely of pro-business forces.<sup>168</sup> These mobilizations included gathering signatures to dismiss the Supreme Soviet, organizing pickets (sparsely attended), and calling for a referendum on the future of the legislative body itself. My interlocutor spoke of how there is a selective politicization of politics insofar as certain decisions are not brought to a referendum.<sup>169</sup> For some decisions, he explained, it is not necessary to ask the will of the people. These civil society

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<sup>167</sup> Both in 1989 and today, left-bank residents associated the Romanian flag with the period of German fascist occupation. The linkage between Romanian nationalism and German fascist should be seen both as a product of the Soviet cult of the Great Patriotic War and of contemporary re-signification for political purposes after 1989. Despite apparent moves toward Romania, unification never enjoyed widespread popularity in Moldova (King 2000: 147).

<sup>168</sup> The Supreme Soviet is the highest legislative body in the PMR.

<sup>169</sup> He cited the current version of the constitution that, in his words, afforded the president the powers of a monarch.

activists [*obshchvenniki*] had made a farce of themselves and of politics. Their actions – parading around, holding pickets, and not even knowing what they were protesting – constituted the actions of unsophisticated individuals, of people doing the bidding of others. Then, in the early 1990s, he stressed, the existence of the region as an independent polity was at stake. Today disputes centered on how to divide authority, rents, and the spoils of “independence.”

This particular dispute was about limiting the power of the president, the process for replacing ministers and clarifying the duties of the vice president. When I asked what they were protesting, one elderly man responded that they were against the Supreme Soviet, against oligarchs.

We are against the Supreme Soviet, against oligarchs. You know what an oligarch is? The oligarchs are masked; we need to show who they really are. The Supreme Soviet is changing the will of the people by trying to change the constitution [limiting the president's powers]. But the constitution was adopted by the *narod*. Therefore, they needed to ask the *narod* from the beginning, and then adopt [the legislation].

Economic inequality — much of it a direct result of the president’s policy — is a secondary concern; their energy is focused on unmasking a hidden presence, oligarchs, who, in addition to not revealing “who they really are” are attempting to change the constitution without consulting those that adopted it in the first place. Politics create a means to control and order society - the spectacle of referenda and its associated rituals gloss over and sanctify a very real inequality.

Residents can participate in creating state power, but they lack a means to exercise it. This protester had internalized the logic of the referendum to the point where all significant political decisions must be subject to a referendum. As member of the intelligentsia, the professor quoted above was embarrassed; such behavior reflected the low level of cultural development in the region. The president’s close advisor, Anna Volkova, brought these protesters, mostly elderly activists of the OSTK, together. While some might argue that referenda do not constitute "world

historical events" like the revolutions Marx wrote about, the irony of Marx's maxim that events happen "first as tragedy, the second time as farce" was not lost on this professor.

### **Referenda in Context: Then**

Referenda crystallized a choice to be made between creating a state to save a people or embarking on an uncertain future. Left-bank residents believed they had the law on their side. "The complexity of the situation lay in the fact that Transnistrians, as supporters of preserving a single state - the USSR, had to demonstrate their commitment to the laws of the union level, and to act not in an anarchic manner, but rather within the legislative field of the USSR" (Volkova 2005: 48). The idea of the birth of the PMR as a democratic movement that had challenged the ossified structure of the communist party proved durable. One PMR official's words illustrate how referenda functioned as a critique of Soviet power.

The referendum is just one of the components of politics. This is reflected in the Constitutions of the USSR and MSSR. The question then arises: why does the Supreme Soviet of the republic not want to take advantage of this right ... they are afraid to know the truth about the legality of their own decisions. What kind of government fears its own *narod* and isolates them through its criminal shield? This happened ... in the 1930s. One may object by saying that all decisions are taken by deputies acting on the behalf of their constituents. But show me a people's deputy who could personally say how many voters supported him on this or that issue? We only now learned that the people have a right not only to work honestly, but also have their own opinion. A referendum will fix the true opinion of voters (Volkova 2005: 56).

These words allude to the show trials of the 1930s and posit the referendum as a corrective to unresponsive elected officials. More importantly, they offer explanations that evacuate complexity and embody a folk psychology in which a mass of people can oppose any decision or rescind the institutional credibility of any political representative. This logic of polling the people can come to cloud almost any political decision. The liminality of one's everyday existence is of secondary concern to political performances that gloss over an otherwise complicated reality.

Accountability was balanced by a call to not upset existing norms, as evidenced by the testimony of an unnamed Moldovan woman below.

I am a Moldovan. Why do they deprive me of my nationality and want me to quarrel with my neighbors and friends? The decision of the Supreme Soviet of the republic [on the changing of state symbols] is a gradual accession of Romania. No one will ask whether we like it or not. ... How many conversations [must we have] about the national revival, but I think that now it is from these "regenerators" that we need to defend the honor and dignity of the nation, national pride and culture (Volkova 2005: 63).

For her, the issue is not solely about whether rapprochement with Romania will result in the deprivation of one's nationality, but about accepting decisions made elsewhere. Her opposition is an attempt to resist efforts to define the boundaries of an already existing political community from beyond. Romania is distant and foreign, while the Soviet categories remain familiar. Why, she implicitly asks, must this harmony be upset? Left-bank residents, through periodic participation in performances of sovereignty centered around the institution of the referendum, actively create a sense of belonging that, though oppositional, remains the primary point of identification with the PMR state.

### **Referenda in Context: Now**

*We need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them*

Jean Baudrillard

In response to a question about whether the fact that there had been only one president in the PMR since its founding in 1990 hurt or helped its quest for recognition, a deputy from the PMR Supreme Soviet responded to the critique of Transnistrian democracy he saw the question as alluding to. "I believe that there is more democracy in Transnistria than in America. How

many referenda have occurred in the United States?” People, he explained, had approved the extension of the president’s term in office.<sup>170</sup> “This is democracy,” he said, referring to the act of people having a say in the affairs of government, “not like in Congress, where two or three hundred decide for the whole country that it will be like this? Where is the democracy — who really controls the country, the *narod* or the three hundred members of Congress?”

Referenda create comprehensible means of comparison, in this case the idea that *our democracy is more direct than yours*. Besides highlighting the uniqueness and singularity to the region, referenda are communicative salvos directed toward ending the region’s liminality-at-large. This seemingly infinite deferral – referenda as the basis for an as yet finalized statehood – allows for the creation and perpetuation of a political vocabulary for residents. Referenda make the abstract concrete insofar as they create active memories and evidence of participation. Their results ceaselessly circulate through local media and become the basis of a political vocabulary in which the people affirm an independence that does not yet exist. Through participation, residents see themselves as taking part in and, to a lesser extent, harnessing these forces that led to the creation of “their” republic.

Referenda also serve as a platform for local PMR politics. The 2006 referendum became a platform for regional political competition as lampposts, walls, and benches as local political parties jockeyed to have their symbols and logos placed alongside calls to the referendum. One local city council deputy angrily recalled to me how during the 2006 referendum another political party had plastered over her banners with their own. She was upset because, in her words, she had run around “24 hours a day” putting up flyers for the referendum while a younger, upstart political party had simply put their posters up over hers. The 2006 referendum

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<sup>170</sup> Curiously, he used the Russian word for a mass of individuals, *lyudy*, and not the collective form of the people, *narod*.



opened up a space to expend resources in the hopes of attracting voters. Fidelity to the referendum as event allows for political subjects who exist in the interstices of the international system to be called forth through participation in this performance.<sup>171</sup> As a collective political body, individuals subjects can only be recognized component of the by professing fidelity and performatively affirming PMR statehood - it is a revolutionary act of faith. A referendum is a truth event and subsequent political action inspired by it is a kind of “allegiance” to this event.

Fidelity to referenda equals to fidelity to the PMR state. One local youth organization had trouble receiving permission to hold a political rally in the capital in December 2008. They were denied permission because they did not submit the required paperwork within the required timeframe of thirty days. Previously, they received permission two or three days before their actions. Their press release implicitly conveys this notion of fidelity and the capital it should generate in the PMR:

Previously, we always easily obtained permission to all of our actions. Sometimes, the administration was coming towards us and betrayed them within 2-3 days after application. This is understandable, because "Proryv!" is always at the peak of political activity and reacts faster than other organizations to events inside and outside the PMR. This was the case during the time of the blockade, referendum, different elections, and the tragic events in S. Ossetia. When they gave their application for permission to hold the march the city administration personally gave their understanding that there wouldn't be any problems with permission and that they could prepare for the event (Proryv press release, March 25, 2009).

A roundtable discussion I attended in May 2009 stressed the importance of the referenda in the PMR. The roundtable featured delegates from Ukrainian NGOs, United Russia's youth organization, and from various PMR political parties and organizations. One deputy in attendance, the representative of a party reputed to be under the control of the ministry of state

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<sup>171</sup> Here I am leaning heavily on Badiou's reading of Paul. "Truth is diagonal relative to every communitarian subset; it neither claims authority from, nor (this is obviously the most delicate point) constitutes any identity." (Badiou 2003: 14).

security (MGB), spoke of the importance of getting youth involved in politics.<sup>172</sup> He spoke about how the youth had taken an active role in organizing the referendum in 2006; he remarked that just as a party without the support of youth has grim electoral prospects, a state that cannot provide for its youth has a dim future. The elder generation, he stressed, had to "work actively" to instill patriotism, a thankless task in a region plagued by out-migration and a growing population of pensioners. Though the referendum happened nearly three years ago, it was invoked as a call to get involved and as a reminder of work to be done.

The 2006 referendum offered material benefits and rewards. One student told of how activists from a local political party offered students ten dollars to put up posters before the referendum. She stressed that for poor students, this was a powerful motivating factor. Performing and participating in PMR sovereignty can be carried out by both interested and disinterested individuals each to their own benefit. For some, participation fulfills an ideological or patriotic purpose, ultimately reinforcing an increasingly difficult subject position in a state of non-recognition, while for others it is simply a matter of money.

Other visible manifestations of civil society in the PMR are organized through similar cash transactions. While there may be a core of interested people who willingly participate, it was not abnormal to encounter blank stares when I asked participants about the goals of a particular event. Besides being met with confused looks, I was once questioned about when participants would receive payment or food.<sup>173</sup> In the PMR and in the wide post-Soviet world, politics as image has replaced the stable ideological environment of the Soviet period. Gone is

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<sup>172</sup> This particular party, *Narodnaya Volya*, The People's Will, takes its name from a left-wing radical organization that successfully assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881. The party is the vehicle of a single person, a former KGB agent who came to Transnistria in August 1992 as a volunteer and subsequently became involved in state security and helped to found the official press agency of the PMR, *Olvia Press*. He served as a deputy in the PMR Supreme Soviet for more than a decade, and is a graduate of the KGB leadership school.

<sup>173</sup> In the PMR, the minimum "benefit" for political rallies is usually transportation, food, and a small participation fee.

the task of building socialism and strengthening the friendship of the peoples. The world of press releases and a carefully crafted montage of images depicting a vibrant political community can be created on the basis of material gain. These manifestations offer insight on what representational forms and practices arise when there is no clear legal or sovereign jurisdiction.

During exchanges with foreign journalists, diplomats, or researchers, referenda become obstacles to any lasting settlement, since any agreement must take their results into account. One article from the Moldovan news agency *Infotag* offers an example of this phenomenon. A 225-word news item headlined "Transnistria Not Going to Become Part of Moldova," describes a meeting between the Deputy Foreign Minister of the PMR, Sergei Simonenko, with a group of Finnish journalists.<sup>174</sup> After a cursory discussion of the "fairly complicated" relationship between Tirasol and Chişinău, Simonenko mentions the PMR's external priorities, namely "further strengthening of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic's independence and development of relations with Russia, which was approved by 97% participants in the 2006 referendum." This periodic recitation illustrates how the PMR state is dependent upon referenda and on the participation of the *narod*. The 2006 referendum is the most recent performative manifestation of the PMR's longstanding struggle for independence and its desire for closer relations with Russia.

The 2006 referendum provided both an opportunity to participate in politics and a means of showing outsiders that, contrary to popular belief, there is a Transnistrian *narod* and they freely take part in the affairs of state; the results of their participation constitute PMR foreign policy. The holders of sovereignty in the PMR, having declared independence in 1990, are still trying to clarify it to themselves and to the outside world two decades later.

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<sup>174</sup> "Transnistria not going to become part of Moldova," Infotag News Agency, February 11, 2009.

The wording of the 2006 referendum points to the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the PMR.<sup>175</sup> Does the PMR truly desire independence and recognition, or is the whole state project a charade in which PMR authorities pretend to be a state for the sake of appearances? If people stopped believing (and participating) in the PMR, what effects would it have? The first question on the referendum affirmed the independence of the PMR and asked about a subsequent “free association” with Russia, while the second asked residents whether they wished to renounce the independence of the PMR (the subject of the first question) and become part of Moldova. In essence, voters were asked to confirm two separate things: the independence of the PMR (already an reality for residents in the region) and a free association with the Russian Federation. The first part of the question, the independence of the PMR, was achieved long ago.<sup>176</sup> The second question, the “free association” with the Russian federation, is the culmination of a concerted effort to position the region and its residents in the Russian political topography. In the context of the conscious effort by elites and state institutions to adopt “Russian standards,” to accept Russian humanitarian aid on behalf of the region’s pensioners, to allow the stationing of Russian peacekeeping troops, and to accept (but not pay for) subsidized natural gas from Russia, the referendum’s positioning of Russia as a possible confederation partner can be seen as wishful thinking. Having no basis in fact (and vehemently denied by the Russian Foreign Ministry and President Medvedev), this expression is the cumulative result of institutions and ideologies that cultivate paints Transnistria and its residents as Russians in every way possible. This shift to a discourse dominated by all things Russian is akin to an acceptance of the lack of a valid subject position: they have a choice between subjection to Moldova or freedom with Russia.

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<sup>175</sup> For a text of the referendum, see above.

Residents have been conditioned to think of themselves as living on Russian land and as living in a state that exists thanks to the goodwill of Russia; the specter of Romanianization has foreclosed any developmental path that leads through Moldova and Europe. Likewise with Ukraine, which since the Orange revolution has been seen locally as a puppet regime of the United States. Unlike South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the PMR lacks contiguity with the Russian Federation. Instead, the PMR has made the case historically, legally, and rhetorically, that they belong within this reconstituted Russian sphere of influence. Lacking physically proximity to Russia, they are left to act “as if” they belong and hope that their message is received and reciprocated in Moscow and beyond.

### **Marshaling the Virtual: Publics, Politics, and People**

The events in Transnistria offer a unique perspective on how questions of loss and belonging can be transformed into a defiant "will of the people" via referenda and other political activities. That these events are unacknowledged outside the region is unproblematic for residents and only serves to reinforce the idea of Transnistrians as a *narod* constituted under pressure whose aspirations and desires lie outside of any Western paradigm of democracy or normative framework. The PMR's unique history allows residents to view the PMR as a democratic state formed through the will of the people.

Today, historiography and referenda constitute nodal points that have, through self-referentiality, heightened a sense of destiny that permeates the region. Undeterred by more than two decades of non-recognition, the struggles, blockades, and assertions of independence have only further refined the Transnistrian *narod*. Having domesticated Soviet internationalism, the

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<sup>176</sup> One regular informant told me that he tells foreigners who do not believe in the PMR to look at the border they just crossed; the borders of the PMR are an objective fact despite only having a *de facto* status.

PMR has transformed the region into a means of at least partially satisfying otherwise unfulfilled political wishes and desires.

PMR state officials give voice to the idea of a Transnistrians as a people forged under extreme external pressure. In response to a question posed by journalists from the BBC Russian Service on the subject of "What does it mean to be a Transnistrian," the vice-president of the PMR Alexander Korolev's response illustrates the principle by which tragedy and difficulties create the objective conditions for the realization of the Transnistrian *narod*.

Over the past 18 years [since Transnistria has declared its independence of Moldova], they [Moldova] made a new people of us by means of various blockades and oppressions. Ethnically, we are Russians, Ukrainians, Moldovans. But by our essence, we are a different nation - with our own culture, a short but tragic history marked with bloodshed and confrontation. And we are the only territory where the Moldovan language has remained. It does not exist anywhere else. Besides, we are the only territory in the entire post-Soviet area where nation-wide referenda were held: we had 7 such polls (Infotag, February 16, 2009).

Nationality is a component of a larger cultural assemblage and the distinctiveness that resulted from the blockades, oppression, bloodshed, and confrontation. Having held seven referenda, the PMR is a bastion of notion of democracy. Referenda are a foundational expression of the will of the people.

One article from the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* talks of a local television personality asking female students in the run up to the referendum whether they knew "that Russia is the only country that provided us with aid during the economic blockade<sup>177</sup>?" (Zygar and Solovyev 2006). Aid from the largely self-imposed (virtual) blockade is positioned in the public's consciousness as a reason to vote for the Russian option.

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<sup>177</sup> The economic blockade is addressed in more detail in chapter four. Essentially, Moldova's changing of the customs regime forced economic enterprises that exported through Ukraine to re-register in Chisinau to receive permission. This regulatory shift occurred in response to the demands of the European Union to regulate the Moldovan economy as a result of EU trade preferences for Moldovan goods.

The referendum was a time for reflecting on the PMR's founding from the perspective of its patron, Russia. Viktor Alksnis, a Duma deputy, spoke of the PMR as originating from geopolitical concerns that arose as the Soviet Union dissolved and not from the will of residents.

It all started at the beginning of the 1990s with the so-called Lukyanov doctrine [Lukyanov was the last Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR], which was developed by a Union group of parliament members. I was one of the authors of the doctrine. In essence, it gave Russia the opportunity to maintain its influence throughout the former Soviet Union. That could be attained only by supporting separatist sentiments in former Soviet republics, thus creating so-called hot spots ...

How things have changed since we thought it up ... I remember the beginning of the 1990s. There was enthusiasm then. There was the feeling of revolution. The feeling of victory in war... Now, there is nothing left of that and things have changed a lot. Now money decides everything. It's too bad about the people. (Viktor Alksnis, quoted in Zygar and Solovyev 2006).

In Alksnis' own words, the people are props. Far from characterizing the early 1990s as a harbinger of chaos, the crazy nineties [*likhie devianostye*], they were a time of enthusiasm. He speaks from a subject position that believes that if these revolutionary sentiments could only have gained traction, things could have been different. Idealism is a welcome repose from the logic of capital and money that now determine the contours of “everything.”<sup>178</sup>

In the months before the 2006 referendum, local economic enterprises privatized by Russian investors came together and founded a political organization called "For Unity with Russia," headed by the then-PMR foreign Minister Valery Litskai. During my interview with Litskai in 2009, he spoke of how the influx of Russian capital shapes and influences the specific forms “politics” takes. As he explained it, the plot makes for a second-rate political thriller without murder or sex. At some point before an election, money changes hands and a new “grassroots” organization emerges. Professional consultants — “political technologists” — arrive from Moscow, Kiev, or beyond. Professionally designed posters and paid canvassers appear.

Public rallies are organized, and television is suddenly inundated with stories of the upcoming election, preceded in this case by a referendum. Perhaps the town's public address system is turned on, and a monotone voice exhorts people on the streets to decide their fate, to decide between a future with Russia or with Moldova.

In the run-up to the referendum, the streets were plastered with posters and people wore t-shirts advertising the referendum. Cruising cars with booming loudspeakers exhorted residents to participate. But despite this over determination, confusion emerged as to whether or not the decision could actually be realized, for many details have not been finalized.

Some think that we'll hold a referendum and tomorrow we will ask to become part of Russia ... I explain that this can't be done now. We cannot issue any decrees about joining Russia! The experience of the European Union shows that 10-15 years are needed for integration processes and only then is it possible to join it. We are at the beginning of the road ... [responding to a question as to why the voters were not aware of the delay between the vote and joining Russia] ... Nobody asked when we will unite. So there was no need to write that. If they had asked me, I would have told them. But they didn't ask. They go around me, whisper quietly and don't ask. Our party will explain it to people. We will answer for the pro-Russian position because immediately after the referendum we will start to talk about the time periods. We will write position pieces. There are no deadlines on the calendar. If we reach the Russian standard of living in half a year, those problems will be solved in that time. If we could bring a few tens of billions of dollars with us to Russia, they would take us instantly (Valery Litskai, quoted in Zygar and Solovyev 2006).

Organized, directed, and executed by the same state institutions and individuals that benefit from the economic and political ties with Russia, the referendum was more about the PMR leadership's need to proclaim its fealty to Russia than to assert its independence. Still, residents remain hopeful. Loyalty to Russia provides pensioners with an additional monthly pension supplement in addition to a sense of belonging that did not denigrate Soviet accomplishments. I am reminded of Philip K. Dick's quote that "reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." While many know that the PMR will not join Russia, they still go and vote for

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<sup>178</sup> Here it is useful to recall the words of Prime Minister Tarlev: "scientists say different things depending on who



it. They know full well whether or not they vote for it the reality will not change — they know what they believe in is irrelevant: what matters is participation.

Occurring a few months before presidential elections in the PMR, the 2006 referendum gave incumbent president Smirnov a platform to show he was strengthening ties with Russia in order to obtain the recognition that has eluded the region since 1990. Oddly enough, the referendum raised a contradiction vis-à-vis the state itself. One can argue that the 2006 referendum violates the PMR's own laws, since the constitution proclaims (in the way that all foundational documents performatively do) that the PMR is a sovereign, independent state.<sup>179</sup> Pragmatic concerns trumped the cultivated façade of state seeking *de jure* sovereignty whose *de facto* status is, perhaps now, more vulnerable than ever. To prolong the incumbency of the PMR's founding father, one of the foundational tenets of the PMR as a state — its independence — is first reconfirmed, reasserted, and now a visible fiction. And while Moldova is the loser in this referendum, the referendum clearly shows how much the PMR's vanquished enemy remains the acknowledged object of its political affections.

Subsequent exchanges serve to extend this drama. A December 2009 meeting between Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin and his PMR counterpart Igor Smirnov was brief and unproductive.<sup>180</sup> Voronin traveled to Tiraspol, where he presented Smirnov with Moldovan proposals for resuming negotiations, establishing spheres for expert groups, and creating the proper conditions for the free movement of people, goods, and capital. In response, Smirnov reminded Voronin that over the previous years of negotiations, numerous documents have been signed “but none of them has been fulfilled by the Moldovan side,” including agreements

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pays them.”

<sup>179</sup> For more on the performativity of fundamental documents, see Jaques Derrida's “Declarations of Independence” in Derrida 2002: 46-54.

stipulating that negotiations be held on equal-rights terms and without resorting to “an economic blockade.”<sup>181</sup> In response to Voronin’s gift, Smirnov gave him the results of the 2006 referendum.

Referenda are a means of creating and continuing politics as ritual, with the results serving as an object around which even more rituals and prolongations can be organized.<sup>182</sup> In the context of the unresolved conflict, referenda are both a performance of sovereignty and a means of agreeing to disagree, with the logic being that *we* Transnistrians conducted referendums, the people spoke, and as their leader I must take this into account. It follows that since your country has not held a single referendum, you have no mandate. This ritual and ceremonial exchange of documents reinforces the community.

Much like the distinctive material processes of the Soviet Union created the base upon which the PMR would later emerged, performances like referenda make the abstract concrete insofar as they allow politics to be made visible. In the PMR, individuals socialized in the Soviet Union still operate under many of the same political constraints that existed in the late-Soviet period (Yurchak 2005) and remain receptive to its semiotic, symbolic, and practical forms.

For left-bank residents who experienced the “bloody summer” of 1992 (or who learned about it as part of a civic education), there is something vital at stake, the life of the *narod* (more on this biological existence in chapter four). Giving a speech to a largely empty exposition pavilion in Moscow for the opening of the PMR’s annual trade show and cultural exhibit,

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<sup>180</sup> Information about this event comes from both field notes and local (Moldovan and Transnistrian) media. For a brief overview, see Infotag’s daily digest from December 24, 2008.

<sup>181</sup> “There really were a lot of variants. If we start recollecting all of them, there will be no use in holding negotiations. I don’t believe you like you don’t believe me. But being state officials, we must discuss the problem. I am accepting your documents and will pass them to the Supreme Soviet and public organizations for consideration,” (Igor Smirnov, quoted in Infotag, December 24, 2008).

<sup>182</sup> The Russian verb *krutit’sia* is perhaps an appropriate way to describe referenda, since the root *krut-* relates to situations of twisting, screwing, wringing things, money, satisfaction, or information out of people or a situation. For more, see Pesman 2000, chapter 9, “If you want to Live, You’ve Got to *Krutit’sia*: Crooked and Straight.”

“Transnistrian Days in Moscow,” PMR President Smirnov declared to the more than seven hundred Transnistrians who travelled with the delegation from Tiraspol that “this is all necessary so that we remember that the Transdniestrian people cannot be killed. It has always been the case they we were in the edge of cultures, and now NATO's task is clear – to squeeze out our identity and show us how to live. But, in last autumn's referendum, our people said we want to develop along with Russia.” (Igor Smirnov, quoted in Solovyev 2007).<sup>183</sup> This same threat of death, visualized through memorial books and photographs of the violated corpse, is reconstituted through referenda that show that the *narod* will not be cowed, killed, or otherwise forced to live in a particular way.

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<sup>183</sup> The annual “Transnistrian Days in Moscow” is an annual event that is part cultural exposition, part trade/investment forum. Transnistria’s large delegation was largely met with stares and, it is intimated, embarrassment. Expecting to be received with open arms and important Moscow and Russian officials, they were largely ignored and relegated to a distant corner of the exposition pavilion.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *BESPREDEL AND BELONGING: BODIES, POLITICS, AND PUBLICS*

*China is a civilization trying to be a state, Saudi Arabia is a family business disguised as a state, Israel is a faith inscribed in a state – and who knows what Moldova is?*

Clifford Geertz, “Politics in Complicated Places”

*In a modern way of knowing, there have to be images for something to become “real.” ... For a war, an atrocity, a pandemic ... to become a subject of large concern, it has to reach people through the various systems (from television and the Internet to newspapers and magazines) that diffuse photographic images to millions.*

Susan Sontag, “On Photography (the short course)”

*The whole question of politics – who gets to do what to whom?*

V. I. Lenin

“When the war began, there arose the necessity for political activity,” Victor explained to me in his office, located in the same building that houses the Tiraspol office of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), the international organization charged with monitoring the Transnistrian conflict. A former deputy minister in the PMR during the initial period after the war with Moldova, I knew Victor as someone who loved to tell stories, ones in which he usually emerged as the most intelligent, level-headed figure. This statement, coming from a fifty-something scientist cum politician cum businessman who was hounding me, the foreigner, for prospective business partners, struck me as odd. While he agreed to my interview request in the hopes of drumming up investors, he seemed intrigued by the chance to tell his story about his role in the development of the PMR. Our interview was long and ranged

from science and technology (he claimed to have patented a method for effortlessly removing the snow from Moscow streets in the winter) to his biography. He was originally from Siberia, from a family of *voennye*, military servicemen, who enjoyed a privileged position in the Soviet Union. After their service, *voennye* received perks that others waited decades for like apartments, durable goods, and land. People like Victor and their families made up a not insignificant portion of the Transnistrian population, Soviet loyalists who resettled in the region and worked in its booming postwar military-industrial complex.

At first it was an engineering elite. This region was very developed. Here [in left-bank Moldova] many enterprises were located with a Union-wide significance. The industrial intelligentsia was very well developed, all of whom were very powerful leaders [in the Soviet sense of being able to marshal people, resources, and labor]. In that time nobody engaged in politics. It was impossible to engage in. There was one party, Marx, Lenin, forward! Nothing more. But when a fried rooster bites you in the ass,<sup>184</sup> war began, and then we needed to do something, we had to protect ourselves. Should we pack our suitcase and leave? Why? Because somebody stupid comes and says I want to control everything, it is all mine. *When the war began, there arose the necessity for political activity.*

These words only struck me later when I began thinking about how this question of violence figured into the origin of the PMR as a polity. This chapter focused on the bodies produced by the 1992 armed conflict with Moldova. Understanding the events of 1992 is vital to understanding the PMR's relative success as a lasting, if unrecognized, polity, for while this "undeclared war" authorizes the political community, it is the practices and perceptions surrounding the images of those killed that afford it legitimacy in the eyes of residents.

A few weeks after my interview with Victor, I conducted an interview with an elderly man, Boris, who was involved in the initial strike movement that led to political disengagement

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<sup>184</sup> The Russian idiom *kogda zharenyi petukh v zhope kliunul* (когда жареный петух в жопе клюнул) means experiencing something difficult or troublesome, or finding oneself in an extremely difficult situation.

with Moldova. As our conversation shifted from a discussion of his organization, OSTK<sup>185</sup> to the current political situation, he began to speak animatedly about provocations from the Moldovan side. Even though we were discussing the present and the future, he remained fixated on the past. He mentioned anti-Russian actions and provocations organized by Moldovan authorities: deputies beaten on the streets in Chişinău and women dragged by their hair from government buildings.<sup>186</sup> As he spoke of these events, his voice trailed off and, his train of thought was interrupted, as if he became momentarily distracted. Next, he calmly mentioned "one woman ... in fact, I have photographs."

At this point he opened up a drawer in his desk and took out some black-and-white photographs of dead bodies. The desk drawer contained hundreds of photographs, including duplicates. Why were these photographs sitting in the desk drawer? What purposes did they serve? As I looked at the pictures, I was disgusted yet fixated. The "one woman" he mentioned looked to be in her early 20s; she had her ears cut off, he calmly told me. Pregnant at the time of her attack, she was raped and murdered. Her husband, he continued, had his penis cut off. As he calmly handed me a picture of her husband, his eyes widened with emotion: "What could we do?" he repeated, shaking his head while at the same time looking for some sort of acknowledgment from me. "Horrible," I replied flatly, not wanting to appear stoic in the face of such horror. While the pictures themselves haunted me, what struck me was how they were used – they framed *his* reality. For Boris, these photographs were a reminder of what could occur if

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<sup>185</sup> OSTK, the Russian acronym for the United Work Collective Council, was formed in response to the Moldovan language law in 1989. The organization led the political movement for the independence of Transnistria.

<sup>186</sup> For more on this violence, see 'TRANSNISTRIA ASSESSMENT MISSION REPORT: Transnistrian crisis: human dimension December 2008 – February 2009' <http://gppac.net/page.php?id=2294> Accessed October 22, 2010.

one was not vigilant. They captured why left-bank residents responded the way they did, why they rose up and asserted their rights.<sup>187</sup>

This chapter looks at bodies and the role they play in state-building practices in the PMR. Building on the idea that photographs offer a means of creating references for their audience, it looks at how warfare relates to the image. Since its inception, photography has been used to shape perceptions. From Mathew Brady's staged civil war photographs to well known Soviet manipulation (Stalin would have enemies of the people excised from official photographs), the staging, manipulation, and outright removal of images is increasingly relevant in our hyper-mediated world where a quick edit in Photoshop can create headlines across the world. The captions attributed to photographs play a key role in reception. For example, photographs of a 1905 pogrom in Imperial Russia circulated in France under a caption attributing the scene to German atrocities (Macdonald 2007: 19). During the Russo-Finnish War, an unnamed editor wanted newsreel footage of the Soviets bombing the Finns; unable to find a single frame from Finland, he used footage from the Spanish Civil War and hoped nobody would notice the absence of snow (Macdonald 2007: 20). I do not argue that the images discussed in this chapter are false or staged. Rather, I look at images and their reception to explore how the bodies produced by this conflict are appropriated by the PMR state and disseminated to its political subjects in a variety of registers and genres.

These narratives of victimization and aggression offer individuals a means of making sense of the region's liminality-at-large and their still-unsettled experiences while at the same time creating an inchoate community of belonging – *They did this to us*. The photographs viscerally transpose and condense political issues into emotional ones: either you acknowledge this occurred or you do not. When these photos were pressed into my hand, I was struck by the

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<sup>187</sup> I have attached some of these photographs in Appendix A along with translations.

role played by these images of death.<sup>188</sup> Death, unflinchingly portrayed, served as a common anchor for residents of the region. Academics working under the auspices of the PMR state reproduced these images in a particular genre of memorial books both to publicize the conflict amongst other Russian-speaking populations and to instill a sense of belonging amongst residents.<sup>189</sup> As a foreigner, I was pressed into acknowledging these images as truth and as reality, for only then could I begin to understand why the PMR existed. Time and time again I was told that only after acknowledging them could I begin to understand how and why the Transnistrian people rose up and formed a state to protect their rights.

This genre of memorial books constitutes an important link in how statehood is performed locally. This became clear to me during a discussion with a student from the local university. A visiting political scientist asked her about recent stories intimating that the Russian President Medvedev was close to resolving the Transnistrian conflict. When he asked about the prospects for settlement, she calmly stated that these two states, Moldova and Transnistria, cannot unite for the simple reason that Moldova is a “state that kills women and children.” As I mentioned this to her later, she told me about the history books and the stories that were a part of her civic education. Despite the fact that she considered herself apolitical, her views were rooted emotionally in these pictures and the reality they portrayed. While she could and would speak about how corrupt the PMR political elite was, she did not have a vocabulary with which to

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<sup>188</sup> At the time of the conflict the state produced numerous videos about the conflict. One video, *Chronicle of an Undeclared War*, produced six months after the war, appears to be a Soviet-era documentary of the region. Two minutes into the video, after introducing the region and showing its peaceful inhabitants voting in a referendum, there is a shot of a bullet-riddled window and ominous narration about the ‘first blood spilled.’ As the camera pans to the body, it zooms in and out on the wounds. This technique is repeated with other bodies, even going so far as to show close-ups of maggots eating bodies dumped in shallow graves. Twice during the film the cameraman approaches waiting refrigerated trucks containing bodies and calmly shows a man opening the trucks and displaying the haphazardly stacked bodies. Viewing this film, one has the sense that whoever made it knew that the bodies were important at the moment of filming, and that their importance would only increase in the future.

<sup>189</sup> A similar book was published about the 2008 war in South Ossetia, documenting the Ossetian and Russian victims.



oppose these images of death. Vis-à-vis Moldova, which has largely not acknowledged the war, in the PMR the conflict and its dead are, in the words of one high-ranking bureaucrat, “cement” for the state. This use of a constructivist metaphor literally and figuratively stresses the importance of the conflict for the state project. Recognition from a state, even an unrecognized one, can be a powerful anchor of belonging, all the more so when loss remains the defining experience of the post-Soviet period.<sup>190</sup>

### ***Bespredel* and Disorder: Death Porn in the post-Soviet media<sup>191</sup>**

One Russian word that I encountered throughout fieldwork was *bespredel*, a word that can simultaneously connote disorder, chaos, lack of restraint, or the absence of shared rules or laws. What many in the West saw as a “transition” from a planned economy to a capitalist one, the average post-Soviet citizen experienced as disorder. The dissolution of the pervasive Soviet state and its institutions, practices, and ideology were condensed into a trope of loss that continues to frame the post-Soviet experience (Oushakine 2009). With the emergence of “freedom” and “democracy” came the radical expansion of media, with television, newspapers, and consumerism filling the gaping void left by the communist ideology.

Democracy and capitalism only seemed to amplify social problems that were kept in check under communism, as the widespread impoverishment of the Russian population coincided with a severe increase of mortality (Russia had the highest death rate in 2002, and its murder rate was third to South Africa and Colombia) (Popov 2007: 47). At the level of spectacle,

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<sup>190</sup> Moldova’s veterans of the 1992 conflict receive measly pensions, if they are acknowledged by the state at all, while Transnistria actively supports veterans financially and socially. Transnistrian veterans are referred to as “Defenders of Transnistria.”

<sup>191</sup> Death porn has become a slang term for the material found on the internet that is intended to induce a titillating sense of revulsion among viewers, to “gross them out.” Pictures/videos of dead bodies, horrible accidents, or blood and guts can all be classified as death porn. Death porn can be politicized. In Russia, skinheads and Chechen

the press and television dwelled at length upon these and other visible indicators of decline. Uncertainty about the future led to a fixation on disorder — *bespredel* emerged as a standard journalistic trope in the post-Soviet space. While not directly related to the particulars of Transnistria and Moldova, death porn as a genre and the way its publicizes death plays a prominent role in how the post-Soviet subject relates to concepts of order and disorder and how individuals transposed these notions onto political domain.<sup>192</sup>

Russian pop culture reflected this fixation on this violence through a specific genre of representation that ceaselessly depicts shocking and scandalous details of post-Soviet life without restraint. This excess of sex, violence and bodily functions was driven by anxiety about the state of the nation. Lacking any larger teleological narrative capable of orienting the senses away from the violence of everyday life, the negative is ceaselessly replayed: “Let us see once again what horrifies us every day” (Borenstein: 2008: 18). Previously, during Soviet times, crime reporting was censored to the point that it was largely non-existent. When the crime rate increased dramatically in the 1990s, fear of crime increased and the media responded in kind.

Tabloid journalism was not limited to Russian-language media. One English-language weekly produced for expatriates in Moscow, the *eXile*, walked a fine line between legitimate investigative journalism and the more hilarious and shocking aspects of life in contemporary Russia.<sup>193</sup> Each edition of the *eXile* featured a section called “Death Porn,” which featured briefly

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insurgents have taken to posting their ambushes and beheadings on the internet. A similar phenomenon happened during the wars in Yugoslavia.

<sup>192</sup> For example, one need only think about how the concepts of order/disorder are related to perceptions of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. The former was reviled for presiding over the rise of economic and demographic decline, while the latter enjoys immense popularity because of his clean-cut, orderly image. Though this is ultimately an artificially-created image, its ability to generate harness populist sentiment should not be underestimated.

<sup>193</sup> The *eXile* was shut down in 2008 for allegedly inciting ethnic hatred. Their covers featured absurd takes on Russian themes, such as depicting Putin as a goose-stepping midget in Third Reich regalia on the eve of his second term as president. In one notable prank they hired Gorbachev to be a *perestroika* coordinator for the New York Jets. Mark Ames, editor of the *eXile*, liked to point out that his publication would have been sued out of existence within

worded, humorous descriptions of murder, cannibalism, dismemberment, and abuse culled from the Russian press.<sup>194</sup> "The coverage of violent crime in the Russian media is about far more than simply reporting the news: the grisly details, sexualized photographs (usually staged), and sheer repetitive content suggest the voyeuristic pleasure and the need for endless, minor variations on a limited number of acts that characterize pornography" (Borenstein 2008: 213).<sup>195</sup> The population of death porn is a result of its capacity to generate pleasure in the reader. When I asked one informant about death porn, he replied that people like knowing that bad things happen to other people.<sup>196</sup> And lest they forget, tabloids reminded ordinary Russians on a daily basis how dangerous their world had become.<sup>197</sup>

*Bespredel* formed the social horizon for much of the nineties in the former Soviet Union. As a concept that lacks a clear beginning, middle, and end, *bespredel* offered a means of making sense of the profound transformations engulfing the former Soviet Union. Whether used to describe the politics of the Yeltsin era or provocations taken by the Moldovan side in the early 1990s, *bespredel* remained an orienting frame of their experience. The unmaking of the Soviet

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weeks of appearing in any Western democracy, but that the Russian elite was too busy stealing and killing to care about them.

<sup>194</sup> Each Death Porn story came affixed with little cartoon pictures, which told you what kind of story elements to expect in the tale you were reading: a Far-Side-ean screaming old woman to indicate "Cries for Help Ignored," a piece of Swiss cheese to indicate "Riddled With Bullets," a turkey for "Carved Up Like a Turkey." Worse still, the stories were narrated with an unabashed voyeuristic glee that even the most progressive of our readers couldn't endorse publicly. Whoever was writing this stuff clearly got off on what he was doing (Ames and Taibbi 2000: 71).

<sup>195</sup> I am reminded by Sebald's description of the aerial bombing of Germany. Sebald writes of survivors, for whom words could not represent the destruction they witnessed. More tellingly, Sebald recalls a teacher who as a boy often saw photographs of corpses from the firestorms lying in the street circulate behind the counter of a secondhand bookstore in Hamburg, "to be fingered and examined in a way usually reserved for pornography." (Sebald 2003: 98)

<sup>196</sup> Tabloid journalism is often referred to by the term *chernukha*. *Chernukha* is a slang term that came into use in the late 1980s to describe an unrelenting negativity and pessimism in the arts and mass media in the Soviet Union. The word itself is based on the word for 'black' [*cherny*] and marks a rejection of the enforced optimism of the official Soviet ideology. In film and fiction, *chernukha* is a cross between pulp fiction and exploitation cinema. As a genre, it focuses one's attention on bodily functions, sexuality, and sadistic violence. Human relations are reduced to questions of survival and domination. Eliot Borenstein, 'Chernukha' in *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, ed. James R. Millar (Farmington, MI: Thomson/Gale, 2004), 242.

<sup>197</sup> The daily reports of murders, rapes, and cannibalism constituted *bespredel* as an endless flow, a process consisting of infinite iterations of the same horrific acts. As a function of the daily crime chronicle, *bespredel* is

world spelled the displacement of the Russophone elite in favor of Moldovans who had long viewed themselves as second-class citizens in their homeland.<sup>198</sup> Despite its own lack of form, *bespredel* shaped this amorphous anxiety.

The images that circulated in the hands of my informants and on the pages of state-sponsored memorial books constituted an emerging form of sentiment, a way to harness affect and create a community based on a collective trauma. The repetition of this trauma only served to reopen the literal wounds on the collective political body and highlight the incapacity to respond to it. As both Victor and Boris intimated, only a *state* could properly respond to this. By ceaselessly replaying the 1992 conflict with Moldova as trauma, the PMR creates a political subject for whom the photographs, complemented by documentary films and other associated memorial literature, “prove” the state’s reason for existence. When seen in the context of the chronology of events that led to the outbreak of violence, photographs offer an unchallengeable record that serve as the basis for belonging.<sup>199</sup> When visually confronted with the death, brutality, and disorder *they* unleashed upon *us*, the question of politics and protection answers itself. In Boris’ words, “what can protect our rights, the rights of us as citizens – what is capable of protecting citizens’ rights? Only a state can defend and protect these rights...”

The *bespredel* and violence of the early nineties created the impetus to form a state to protect residents. After the violence had ended, those who would later come to head the PMR (and who would benefit immensely from its existence) required a reason for the state project to continue. After all, peace was secured in 1992, and there has been no subsequent bloodshed —

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"without bounds" precisely because it lacks a beginning, middle, and end: all the stories run together into a single, nightmare narrative of a Russia that is out of control. (Borenstein 2008: 214).

<sup>198</sup> One memorial book, the *White Book of Transnistria*, writes about trolleybuses in Chişinău with posters declaring “We give you five years not in order to learn the language, but in order for you to leave here.” On the Supreme Soviet in Chişinău anti-Russian and anti-Semitic phrases were written in meter-high Russian letters: “Russians beyond the Dnestr [the boundary between Moldovan and Transnistria], Jews into the Dnestr.”

the issue of protecting the population from further conflict is thus without merit. Given this lack of ongoing violence, it is all the more important that what violence occurred occupy a prominent role in the collective experience of the region and its inhabitants. Hence the appropriation and circulation of these images of death — if these bodies and their trauma cannot be symbolized, then the state becomes all the more important given this lack of resolution. As is clear in chapter four, this lack of resolution generates a variety of means of enrichment at the expense of residents.

### **Bodies, Politics, Publics: The Politics of Dead Bodies**

Bodies have played a curious role in politics and sovereign power for centuries. From Bodin's earliest formulations on sovereignty to Ernst Kantorowicz's (1957) ideas about the king's *corpus naturale* and the *corpus mysticum*, the body retains a central role in sovereignty, from sovereignty's indivisible corporality in the form of an absolute monarch to the king's mystical body that could not be destroyed, the *body politic*. Contemporary biopolitical theories (Agamben 1998) show how sovereignty, operating through the structure of the exception, takes the lives of citizens into the political realm.<sup>200</sup>

Yet when one speaks of the state, corpses are not always what they seem, particularly with regard to the bodies of those that perish at the hands of the state. The state is a magical entity (Taussig 1997), a curious form that capable of endowing a once-living object with supernatural powers. Those who perished at the state's hands were bestowed with certain powers: the corpse of the executed criminal was a "wondrous entity capable of restoring life and

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<sup>199</sup> Barthes (1981: 34) writes that photography cannot signify except by assuming a mask which, to paraphrase Calvino, is a mask which forms the face into the product of a society and of its history.

<sup>200</sup> "The original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion)" (Agamben 1998: 181).

health in sick people” (Taussig 2003: 123). Executions were where the magic happened. The substances contained within the bodies of the condemned were capable of generating new biological and magical forms. The mandrake plant sprouted where the urine or semen of an executed man landed, hence its nickname “little gallows man” (121-122). Bodies and politics exist in a symbiotic relationship, with the political authority productively using them and their surplus of symbolic meaning (Stepputat 2007, Verdery 1999).

In *The Political Lies of Dead Bodies*, Verdery asks, in response to the spate of reburials in the post-socialist world, what bodies can do, politically speaking. Her argument is that the dead body's importance lies in its materiality.<sup>201</sup> In a time of media manipulation and free-floating simulacra, to have the actual bones in hand is, at some level, comforting. Verdery argues that the spate of reburials after socialism is actually a fight over the terms of national identities, with bodies serving as physical and ideological weapons. By bringing home (and claiming) bodies as national objects, their re-internment as national subjects binds them to the nation in an orderly (national) universe. Bodies are also effective symbols for revising the past.<sup>202</sup> Their movement and circulation in amidst political upheaval reflects anxieties about the magnitude of the change that first brought these corpses back to life.

The different situations in which these photographs (and the memorial books they were reproduced in) were impressed upon me led me to reflect upon the conditions of production and the issue of audience – by whom and for what purpose did this genre emerge? The conditions surrounding my viewing of the photos were rather specific. I came across these books through a variety of informants – from professors, from left-bank residents, and from politicians who

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<sup>201</sup> Other examples of note include Lenin's body (Yurchak n.d.), Rasputin's undead corpse, and the lost remains of the Romanovs. Other contemporary examples concern the cellphone video of Saddam Hussein's execution and Gaddafi's last moments, each of which are perhaps as visceral as the photos of the Ceausescus' last moments.

offered them to me as gifts. When others noticed me leafing through these books, many became curious and often questioned me about them. Their interest was not feigned — on more than one occasion they borrowed them for their own close readings. Left-bank residents would likely encounter these photographs in a state-sponsored memorial book or as part of their civic education. One acquaintance that worked in a Chişinău museum marveled over the production quality and wondered where the money to produce them came from. Another informant, a student at a university in Chişinău, remarked that she envied people in Transnistria because they have a unitary history compared to a Moldovan historiography with its seemingly endless revisions.

The books, described in detail below, also constituted a forbidden story that could potentially spell danger insofar as they showed what truly happened. When one elderly woman pressed one into my hands, she whispered that these books show the truth, and that I should be careful who I show them to “over there” and to be particularly careful when I cross the border, lest I put myself in any sort of danger. The implicit warnings of a kind-mannered elderly woman hint at the (actual or potential) political implications of these images. For Transnistrians, these books were part of a truth that remained unacknowledged by the world. As a foreigner, it was my job to speed these images out of the PMR and allow them to tell their story. I would be smuggling images, not contraband, out of Europe’s “black hole.”

These images and their reproduction for political purposes raise the question of materiality and of utility – what can pictures of dead bodies productively do? While their productive life forces are gone, their role in sovereignty and the constitution of the polity remains. The images of these bodies are not the canvas upon which sovereignty visible makes its

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<sup>202</sup> Susan Gal’s (1991) analysis the return of Bela Bartok’s remains shows how reburial relates, in the Hungarian case, to the discourse about Europe and national identity in the context of late socialism in Hungary.

presence known, but actual proof, evidence of the need for a state. Their material physical remains — both the bodies themselves and their photographs) are proof of aggression. As images they are used in constructing the dominant narrative of PMR statehood, and they are appropriately celebrated as ritual objects. These bodies exemplify a particular form performativity that has to be re-stated over, and over, and over because it cannot be finalized and/or anchored in any institution. Individual bodies can be both the effects of disorder (i.e., as a result of crime, alcoholism, accidents) as well as evidence of the need for a state. As Russia and other Soviet successor states continue to experience a precipitous demographic decline (addressed in detail in chapter four), the symbolic and practical roles played by national bodies only increases.<sup>203</sup> The dead, dismembered, violated corpses pictured in PMR-sponsored memorial books not only point to the loss and disorder, but also its transcendence in the form of the PMR.

### **Picturing Death in the PMR**

An exhaustive discussion of the photographs contained in these memorial books is beyond the scope of this chapter. In this section, I look at the two books, *Dubăsari: Krovotochaschaya Rana Pridnestrov'ya* (Dubăsari: Bleeding Wound of Transnistria) (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993a) and *Bendery: Rasstrelynnnye Nepokorennnye* (Bender: Shots Unbowed) (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993b) to give the reader a sense of the content and imagery of this genre. Ultimately, what I hope to convey is the productive work these images perform in the context of the state. In terms of an abstract law or sense of justice, they serve as a means of legitimizing certain claims. At the level of emotion, they offer a way of harmonizing affective

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<sup>203</sup> Adriana Petryna's (2002) work in Ukraine on Chernobyl-related illnesses and national narratives of victimization explores how damaged life forms the basis for national sovereignty and citizenship in post-Soviet Ukraine.



regimes and sentiments for residents. At the metaphorical level, they create a passive symbolic world in which an imperative to recognize the victimization of left-bank residents is equated with a recognition of the PMR as a state.

The selective discussion of photographs that follows is meant to give a sense of the imagery, positioning, and content of these memorial books. Typically, each book contains a historical overview of the events in question (the two books mentioned above deal with violent events in Dubăsari and Bender, two cities that experienced the heaviest fighting over the course of the conflict). Each book's historical narrative contains no references and avoids mentioning any other interpretations of events. They are neither traditional history books intended for primary or secondary school nor photography books. Their purpose is neither academic nor educational, but rather ideological insofar as they produce an uninterrupted narrative on the events in question. This ideological thrust is made by taking the most salacious details of those killed and presenting them as clinically as possible.



**Fig 5.** Cover of the memorial book *Dubăsari: Bleeding Wound of Transnistria* (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993a).

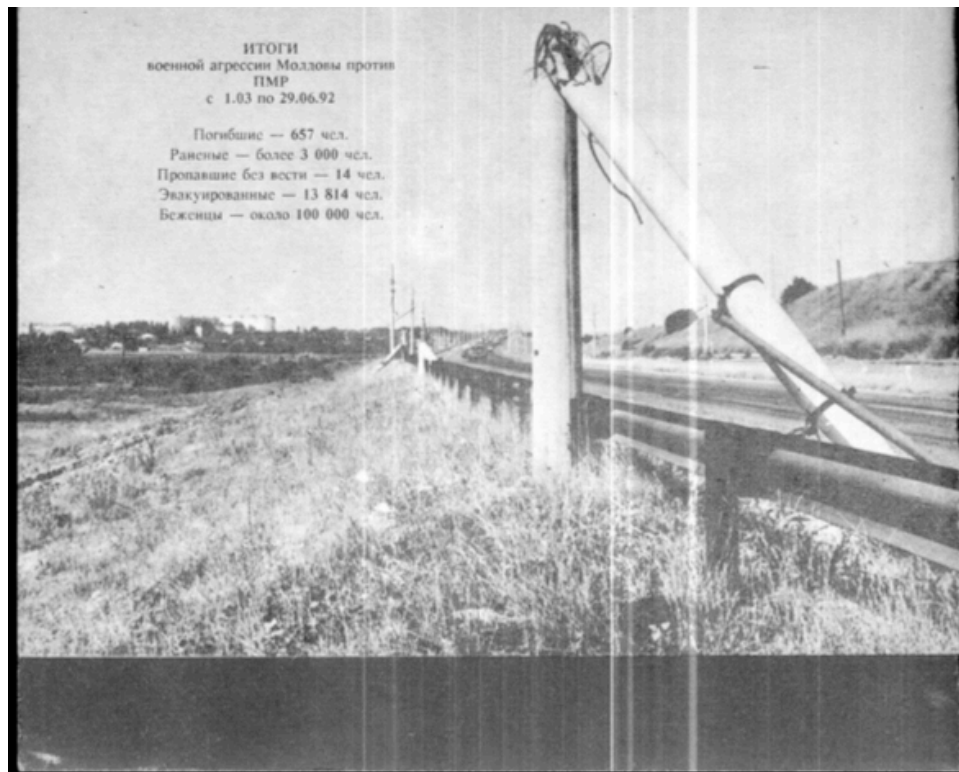


**Fig 6.** Cover of the memorial book *Bender: Shots Unbowed* (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993b)

The cover of each book depicts some aspect of the armed conflict, including mass gatherings (funerals or protests) or images of physical destruction. In terms of the latter, a broken guitar lying on the windowsill of a demolished apartment symbolizes perhaps the impossibility or artistic expression in these troubling times. From this imagery and the accompanying narrative, it is clear that the events are traumatic and tragic. Indeed, one volume contains a citation from the April 22, 1993 edition of *Pravda* that calmly recites the collective body count unleashed by the demise of the Soviet Union:

Since 1991 we have lost approximately 150,000 in wars on the territory of the former Soviet Union. This is eleven times greater, then [were lost] in ten years of war in Afghanistan — such is the scale of the new tragedy. (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993b: 29).

The inclusion of the events of 1992 within the wider “Soviet tragedy” illustrates how both residents position the region within the wider post-Soviet context of loss. The back cover of *Bendery: Rasstrelynnnye Nepokorennnye* (Bender: Shots Unbowed) adds the PMR’s casualties to this wider tragedy that continues to day: “Results of armed aggression of Moldova against the PMR from March 1<sup>st</sup> to June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1992. Dead: 657, Wounded: more than 3,000, Missing: 14, Evacuated: 13,814, and Refugees: around 100,000.” These casualty figures calmly spell out the region’s contribution to the “new tragedy.”



**Fig 7.** Back cover of the memorial book *Bender: Shots Unbowed* (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993b).

Only photographs follow each book’s outline of events, typically two to four to a page, with captions describing them. Some depict the bloated bodies of corpses in caskets, while others appear to be autopsy photographs or documentary evidence gathered after the fact. Each

photograph is oriented around a common set repertoire of themes: physical destruction, a dead body, innocent bystanders caught in dangerous situations, or those who heroically defended the PMR. Some photos appear to be skeletal remains that were unearthed, photographed, and then reburied. The exceptions to the images of the dead are photographs that depict the material decay of the war torn region: demolished houses, destroyed schools, and piles of rubble that are noted only by their street addresses. This simple caption of a street address next to a pile of rubble implicitly asks the local reader to compare the destruction to their pre-war images and memories. Photographs depicting bodies typically focuses on the victim's face, the exceptions being skeletal remains or the bodies of those who were bound, burned, or otherwise tortured. In these cases, the prone, defenseless body serves as what Barthes calls the *punctum*, that which “pierces the viewer” (1981: 25).

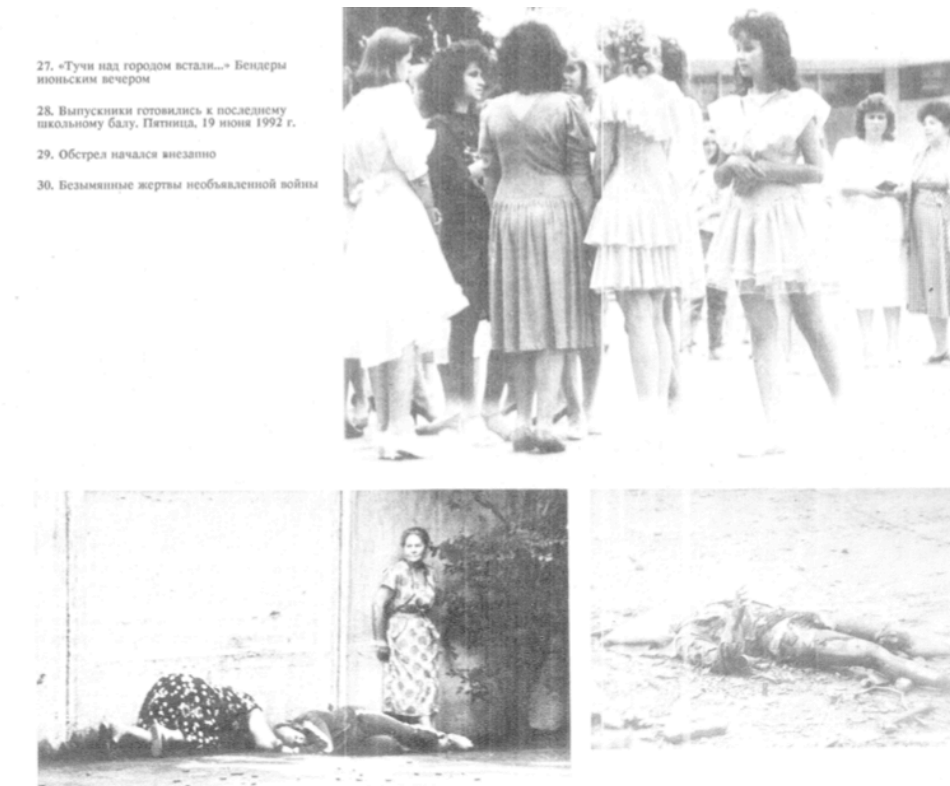


**Fig 8.** Page from the memorial book *Dubăsari: Bleeding Wound of Transnistria* (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993a).

The photograph above has three captions (Fig. 7). The first is a picture of the “author and journalist of the Don Cossacks A. Berlizov, who died in the village of Coșnița.” The second shows a funeral of the *ataman* (leader) of the Dubăsari Cossacks P. S. Sazonov, which took place at Victory Square in the city of Dubăsari.<sup>204</sup> The third photograph shows a ten-year old girl, Tatiana Gatskan, who was raped and murdered in her basement. Her eyes and mouth are slightly open, as if the photograph captures her last moments among the living. The fact that the caption mentions her place of death implies that she was an innocent bystander seeking shelter. Those depicted in this book fall into a variety of categories: Cossack volunteers, innocent victims such as children and the elderly, people who were tortured, and those attending the funerals of volunteers and defenders. Occasionally, photographs will show a battle scene — one picture (figure 8) shows an elderly *babushka* crouching to protect two young girls while a Transnistrian soldier cautiously scans the distance; its caption ominously explains that somewhere a sniper “is working.” Another shows a group of children sitting cheerfully while their parents visibly fret while, it is implied, the “undeclared war” rages on. This image’s caption prioritizes events for the reader: “the main thing — save the children” (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993a: 14).

Often the photographs serve as a visual component of a story that has become a foundational theme of PMR history. One storyline elaborated by the PMR’s official state narrative holds that Moldovan MiG-29 fighters bombarded innocent schoolchildren as they gathered to celebrate the end of the school year. This photo sequence shows school graduates gathering for their annual end-of-the-year school dance. Three elderly residents crouching for cover follow this innocent scene of youth — “bombardment began suddenly.” The last picture

depicts a burned, mutilated body of uncertain provenance: another of the “nameless victims of the undeclared war” (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993a: 19). The story told by these photographs is both simple and complex. As evidence of victimization, now they visually perform the PMR’s very *raison d’être*.



**Fig 9.** Page from the memorial book *Bender: Shots Unbowed*. The captions for the pictures are, clockwise, “graduates preparing for their last prom, Friday June 19, 1992; bombardment suddenly began; and nameless victims of the undeclared war.” (Babilunga and Bomeshko 1993b: 12)

At the symbolic level these photographs are building blocks, connective tissues, material-cum-imaginary artifacts around which the PMR state, along with its residents, performs its sovereignty. The repetitive functions taken by these images during their circulation — as images

<sup>204</sup> In the Transnistrian conflict, Cossacks are considered defenders of the region and today exist as a paramilitary force under the control of the PMR Ministry of Defense. The Moldovan government considers them to be mercenary

they are staged endlessly in a manner that forecloses any alternative interpretation — alludes to their performative function. While they constitute evidence, the manner in which I first encountered them, tucked away in a desk waiting for an audience, hints at their performative function and at the potential pleasure one might gain from viewing them. At the communicative or narrative level, these photographs tell a story that must be retold to outsiders. For individuals like Boris, they are reminders and exist as a fundamental component of a local political cosmology in which the state is the protector of the innocent. For others, the photographs allude to a more fundamental repetition that lies at the core of the PMR. Unable to reach a definitive, stable solution, these images must be repeatedly displayed both in public and in private insofar in order to embody successfully the experiences that led to the emergence of the PMR state.

The authors of these books are a collective of academics and intellectuals from the local university in Tiraspol. All were educated in the Soviet Union, and in my interactions with them most saw their job not as propagandists but as documentarians. There was little reflexivity on their role as shapers of historical truth. This is likely because of their belief that history is largely an objective phenomenon with its own forces, which they, as historians, can only chronicle. The photographs themselves are of unknown origin, though I suspect that military officials or the actual combatants themselves took them.

### **Narrating Loss and Belonging**

The instrumentalization of loss and disorder offers a potent tool for states. Writing about provincial Russia, Oushakine shows how a negative attachment to the state based around narratives of victimization and trauma, the “work of the negative” (Green 1999), can create new forms of collectivity and subjectivity (2009: 5). From these narratives of change, loss, disorder,

and violence, individuals offer both a general framework for making sense of their experiences while simultaneously creating a potential audience for them. These "communities of loss" served in the position of both the author and target audience of these narratives of suffering (Oushakine 2009: 5).<sup>205</sup>

In the context of the loss of the Soviet state and its social, economic, and linguistic guarantees, *bespredel* and the ambiguity of the time offered potent tools for those who could tame them. Those that came to power in Transnistria noticed early on that this disorder and its images could become a potent tool in the right hands. If they could successfully transform this disorder into belonging, they would have a natural basis for a state. In the service a higher state power, the bodies of those killed are more than mere bodies. As images, photographs offer a practical means of rallying the political community and performing PMR sovereignty. These performances complement the necessary Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of force secured through the decisive intervention of the 14th Soviet Army.

Boris offers an intriguing portrait of a Transnistrian patriot. Originally active in the early strike movement, his organization, OSTK, is now relegated to a small office in the local House of Soviets. Despite the central role his organization played in the formative period of PMR state formation, today the organization resembles a pensioners' club where people drop by, chat about politics, and trade conspiracy theories. In Boris' interview, he began by discussing the founding of the OSTK, the United Work Collective Council. OSTK led the political movement for the independence of Transnistria, and OSTK's leader, Igor Smirnov, has been president of Transnistria since its inception. OSTK was founded in 1989 in response to the proposed Moldovan language law, which mandated a switch from the Cyrillic to the Latin script. People

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<sup>205</sup> "The patriotism of despair [...] emerged as an emotionally charged set of symbolic practices called upon to mediate relations among individuals, nation, and state and thus to provide communities of loss with socially



like Boris equated the switch to the Latin script with a shift toward Romania, and the specifics of the language law with a liquidation of Moldova (at all levels – identity, statehood, language). As he told me this he spoke of the growth of Moldovan nationalism, how “they” wanted to (re)unify with Romania, like they had between the wars.<sup>206</sup> He equated this orthographic with a denial of Moldovanness. As he said this he explained, in a didactic manner, that Moldovan and Romanian are different languages (despite the fact that he spoke neither).

PMR’s right to exist as a state is, for residents, bound to the Soviet values that make the region distinct. To deny these differences between the Moldovan and Romanian languages was to challenge the Soviet knowledge that led to the creation of Moldova in the first place. Tellingly, after discussing the language issue, he immediately shifted to darker themes – the emergence of mass discontent and disorder. In response to this disorder, he spoke of how factory directors spontaneously formed a strike committee and “all enterprises stopped production and went on strike.” When Moldovan authorities arrested strike leaders, residents responded by blockading railroads and highways in a way that effectively shut down Moldova's economy.<sup>207</sup> For Boris, these actions were grassroots and anti-nationalist; he was quick to assert that he was personally against nationalism in all forms. As explained in chapter one, political organizing in the PMR attempted to activate a Soviet idea, which, at the time, residents believed could exist outside the context of the USSR.<sup>208</sup> More than once, it was framed to me as the “Soviet way” without the party.

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meaningful subject positions" (Oushakine 2009: 5).

<sup>206</sup> Not being Romanian territory, Transnistria was used as a killing field of extermination for Jews and non-Romanians by the fascist regime of General Ion Antonescu. This bloody period was stressed by the Soviets as distinguishing Moldova from Romania. The symbolic linkage between death and Romania lingers in the popular imagination, especially among those fully socialized in the USSR.

<sup>207</sup> As a Soviet border state, Moldova had limited economic and social exchanges with Romania. Infrastructure was oriented to the east.

<sup>208</sup> For more on how internationalist mobilization operated in the 1990 Moldova election, see Mason 2009.

Hostile forces besieged this internationalist ideal. In Boris' interview, he spoke of how Transnistria had even asked for help from Moldova. In the early 1990s, the material and symbolic lines of support from Moscow were cut, and times were hard.

In the early 1990s when it [the Soviet Union] collapsed, there was no money and we asked for help from Moldova [Chișinău]. They already led an aggressive policy against us. [When we asked for help] they scoffed at us...

It is at this point that he took out more photos. As he showed them to me, he asked, "What else we could have done?" He talked about how residents were outmanned and outgunned: "they came with guns, we came simply with sticks ... the whole of the people rose up." He chronicled the shootings and aggressions in various Transnistrian cities. In his narrative, there is never an end point or an agreed upon sequence of events – they did this, we tried to resolve it peacefully, and they reacted in a violent and barbaric manner. This pervasive form of *bespredel* can only be overcome with a structure that forecloses its possibility: the state.

The opening passage of one memorial book, *Dubăsari: Bleeding Wound of Transnistria*, adds form to the *bespredel* that serves as the antithesis of the Transnistrian state.<sup>209</sup>

In Transnistria blood is being spilled. The war continues in Transnistria. The war started by the ruling in Moldova clique, an ethno-bureaucratic regime of a national-socialist character. The absurd war goes on, crazy in its meaning, criminal, inhumane, barbaric in its form. And to recall the famous formulation of Clausewitz that war is the continuation of politics by other means, then you might say that the Transnistrian war became a logical consequence of that absurdity and craziness into which Moldova was plunged at the beginning of the 1990s. The Transnistrian war is a continuation of the criminal, inhumane, barbaric politics of the Chișinău regime (Babilunga and Bomesenko 1993a).

Boris is not concerned with the origins of these clashes, nor with my specific questions about how these conflicts began (in reality, those who 'rose up' were attempting to take over police stations loyal to Chișinău). In his narrative, Transnistrians do everything possible to

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<sup>209</sup> This particular book was written by a professor of the history faculty at Transnistrian State University. A Moldovan member of the academy of sciences during the Soviet period, he left his home in Moldova's capital and moved to Transnistria when the *bespredel* began.

accommodate Moldova while they commit these crimes. As his voice quickened, he listed the compromises they were willing to make: the different levels of power within a unified state (a special economic zone, autonomy, a federation). As he trailed off, he indirectly addressed the late Soviet power dynamics through an explanation of how left-bank Moldova contributed disproportionately to the MSSR budget. Yet he never addresses the Russian subsidies that enabled the PMR to exist today. For Boris, productivity comes not from the Soviet center or from the Russian Federation, but from local forces. The inequalities of Soviet development that left the PMR was a disproportionate amount of the MSSR's industry and the stakes of altering this balance of power are reflected in his narrative. As the author of this narrative on loss (of individual lives, more generally of stability and belonging), Boris simultaneously serves as both author and audience. It is not a question of interpretation - *he was there, this happened in front of his eyes*. As Boris continued to talk about further provocations, he showed me pictures of people shot in the head.<sup>210</sup> He talked about an ambulance that was targeted, of women killed while trying to retrieve the bodies of the dead. After he trailed off ("that is who we had to deal with"), he carefully brought out me more pictures of dismembered, bullet-ridden bodies. He delicately fingered these black and white images before handing to me, furtively glancing at me for acknowledgement. He ended our conversation by stressing how they could not "talk" to them; bodies foreclosed rapprochement.

Boris' logic is straightforward. Provocations continued, people were killed, and the pictures you hold in your hands prove this. Transnistrians needed to defend themselves, and only a state could defend its citizens. He talked about how OSTK sent letters to Gorbachev, which

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<sup>210</sup> He neglected to use the appropriate death porn label for the headshot, control shot [*kontrol'ny vystrel*], control shot, the final headshot meant to guarantee death after an initial ambush.

told of the genocide that was going on here, but their decision was made – they (Gorbachev, Shevardnadze) dissolved the USSR.

Non-Moldovan speakers had everything to lose in an independent Moldova since the emergence of Moldova as a national state would likely shift power away from non-titular minorities who prospered during Soviet times. Boris seamlessly shifted from questions of geopolitical significance (to preserve or dissolve the Soviet Union, the world's largest country) to the workplace. As is clear from Boris' own recollection of the events that led to the creation of OSTK, language played a large role, but in retrospect he sees language as secondary to more material concerns like feeding one's family. Boris told me about a cousin who was dismissed from the local agricultural institute because of his nationality. A Moldovan who “bought” his diploma replaced him.<sup>211</sup> His cousin's boss understood his situation and was sympathetic, but the need to develop the capacity of national cadres prevailed and he was fired. This Soviet "affirmation action" would be replaced by a national-tinged one in which Moldovans would dominate state institutions. In his narrative, there exists a continuum that begins with the actual and real stakes of Moldovan domination – losing your job, your privileged position – and ends with something more sinister like having your pregnant wife raped and murdered, or your corpse dismembered and defaced.

The crystallization of Transnistrians as a group or a people in need of protection exemplifies what Rogers Brubaker calls "groupness as event" (2004: 12). For Brubaker, seeing groups as variable and contingent rather than fixed allows one to account for their trials and tribulations, which can include their relatively cohesive moments of intensely felt collectivity (in this case, when confronted with a perceived external threat to vital interests such as survival) to

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<sup>211</sup> Purchasing diplomas from institutes of higher education is common across the former Soviet Union. Often, middle-aged individuals purchase their diplomas to receive promotions.

times when the notion of groupness fails to crystallize. Photographs of the dead allow for a Transnistrian community to emerge: they are used to construct groups. They are used by the state to affirm a community that engages in politics only after its rights have been violated. It is only after the Transnistrian *narod* has been pushed, beaten, killed, and threatened with extermination that they responded as they needed to. Important when looking at these state narratives of victimization is how the ethnic framing (anti-Russian, pro-Romanian) masks the basic pursuit of a narrow group's interests. By successfully utilizing grassroots organizing techniques, mobilizing factory workers along existing Soviet lines of internationalist solidarity, and performing PMR sovereignty through the invocation of this and other narratives of victimization, a small cadre of PMR elites have profited immensely through the creation of a state structure that is seen as protecting the rights of its “citizens.” To invoke the classic distinction of Max Weber, they live *off* politics as well as *for* politics (Weber 1946). Similarly, Abrams’ notion of the state as “itself the mask that prevents our seeing political practice as it is” (1988: 58) retains a sense of the people being duped. Taussig goes even further with this idea of the state as a mask, implicating the State in the cultural construction of reality that is “inherently deceptive, real and unreal at one and the same time — in short, a thoroughly Nervous System” (1992: 113).

## **Conclusion**

Statehood, sovereignty, and belonging are largely things taken for granted. To paraphrase Abrams (1988: 58), the state is not the reality that stands behind the mask of political practice; it is the mask that prevents us from seeing political practice as such. The unfinished teleology of the PMR (lacking recognition as a sovereign state) leads to an ideological overcompensation and fetishization of it. Its documents not recognized, its passports not accepted at any international

border, and its citizens paid in a currency whose value is largely a fiction, citizens are left to create a space for belonging amidst the symbolic detritus of the recently-departed Soviet Union and its contemporary multinational prosthesis, the Transnistrian Moldova Republic. The PMR recently had to extend the deadline for the exchange of Soviet-era identity documents because its aged population<sup>212</sup> refuses to exchange them for Transnistrian ones. As one informant told me, "Who wants to exchange the documents from a superpower for a passport from a banana republic?"

Despite the attempts described above, attachment to the state is waning. Fewer and fewer patriots rally around a polity that is increasingly unable to provide materially its citizens. This lack of interest in politics is largely seen by residents as a referendum (no pun intended) on the ruling authorities who have largely enriched themselves while the people suffer. Authorities have also failed to create a competitive political space that might at least attract people to the polls. The narratives of resistance and grassroots democracy have given way to a stagnation whereby Transnistria's incumbent President, Igor Smirnov (in power from 1991-2011), created a vertical power system of close associates and family members who have monopolized every profitable outlet in the country.

As I ran out of questions and my Russian wore thin, I asked Boris what he thought of Sheriff, a local company covered in detail in chapter four. His eyes brightened, and he spoke of how when one goes shopping in a Sheriff supermarket you can feel like a civilized person, not having to ask the sales clerk for each and every item behind the glass display cases (this was the model for the typical Soviet supermarket). He talked about the charitable policies of Sheriff in the form of a seven percent discount for pensioners on the first thousand Transnistrian rubles (seven percent of the first \$100) of purchases per month, which ensures that pensioners spend

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<sup>212</sup> The PMR has nearly 150,000 pensioners.

nearly all of their meager pensions at Sheriff. He went on to describe the massive soccer complex outside town built for Sheriff's football squad, which plays in the Champions League under the Moldovan flag. "We support Smirnov because he gives back to us, because he does something." As I looked around the bare walls of the OSTK office, I reminded him that we were talking about Sheriff and not Smirnov. When I asked him whether they were one and the same he dismissed the question out of hand through the deft use of an old Russian proverb, which translates as "the dogs bark, but the caravan moves on." This was perhaps a fitting riposte to a foreigner questioning the workings of this murky state, *his* state.

Based as they are in the realm of narrative, the origins and reality of this unrecognized state are powerful for some, ignored by others, and acknowledged at some level by most. Whether this acknowledgement takes place in the mandatory history courses in primary and secondary school, on Transnistria's borders, through the use of state documents, at a currency exchange booth, or through an ill-defined feeling of difference vis-à-vis Moldova, the PMR state exists, even if its presence is acknowledged only for the purposes of dismissing it. While one can deny its legitimacy, one cannot deny its effects.

If the fictional reality of the state is socially powerful, then scholars must focus not only on those discourses and practices that produce this state form as real but also on the actual social and subjective life of this formation we call the state. If the state appears and acts as having a life of its own, then we are in the presence of a fetish and must ask for the powerful ways in which this fetish works. To look for state effects is also to follow the ways in which those identified as the state enact their fantasy vis-à-vis those others it considers its enemies (Aretxaga 2003: 401).

Its enemies numerous and known, Transnistria has had more than 20 years during which to inscribe itself upon the body politic. The PMR's most recent referendum affirmed its course of independence and free association with Russia. Voter turnout was 78.6% of the nearly 400,000 registered voters. So while Geertz, interpretive anthropology's leading luminary, may have had

lingering questions about what Moldova is, surprisingly, Transnistrians themselves remain astutely aware of what Moldova remains capable of because they have the bodies to prove it.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### FIEFDOMS, SUBSIDIES, AND THE VIRTUAL

*Gregory Marakutsa [a Transnistrian politician instrumental in the region's declaration of independence] said then [September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1990]: We will build a little Switzerland. We did not have to build it, it had already been built. It was not a joke! Every working Transnistrian produced four times the average Soviet citizen. We had modern factories, power plants, irrigated lands, and large livestock and poultry facilities. Only don't destroy it! ... And our main assets - the intellectual potential of scientists, business leaders, and the professional level of workers, farmers. We had on our side the sympathy of the people of Great Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. We would know how to convince the majority of the residents of Moldova of our correctness. But everything happened exactly the opposite. Under the strict guidance of Igor Nikolayevich Smirnov everything was promptly destroyed, even that which seemed indestructible. They sold everything that could be sold for pennies. They long ago forgot where they spent the money.*

*Evgeni Nikitin, citing Gregory Marakutsa, September 2, 2010*

How does a region go from being a potential “little Switzerland” to the poorest region of the poorest country in Europe? On the surface, the story appears straightforward: those controlling the state institutions took the reigns of this “little Switzerland” and turned it into a fiefdom, in the process selling (privatizing) all they could. This is also a story of how an unrecognized state commercialized its newfound sovereignty. Gradually, over more than two decades, the people shifted from the initial holders of sovereignty to, in the words of one high ranking PMR bureaucrat, biomass [*biomassa*], the biological base of a profitable system. This metaphor, which I will return to at the end of this chapter, succinctly conveys the powerlessness of residents as a population yet simultaneously conveys their absolute importance for the political economy of the region. Transnistria constitutes a post-Soviet Matrix that people largely cannot escape because of poverty, visa requirements, and the nostalgic pull of homeland [*rodina*]. Much like Neo is offered a blue pill that would return him to his old life, or a red pill that would answer the question of what the Matrix is, the population is offered the blue pill in the

form of nostalgia and trope of an idyllic “little Switzerland,” while access to the red pill is strictly controlled: to acknowledge contradictions or shortcomings would negate sacrifices measured in blood. The PMR offers a story of economic failure that has, paradoxically, been a political success. Alongside the establishment of state institutions, the PMR has been successful in profitably restricting flows of capital, people, goods, and, perhaps most importantly, ideas.

### **Biology and the Nation**

Equating the region’s population to biomass is a literal metaphor that captures their role as captive generative elements in the region’s economy. The term itself also reflects a wider return to bodily metaphors and biological determinism in the post-Soviet world is rooted in many of the unresolved demographic and political contradictions of the post-Soviet condition.<sup>213</sup>

Demographically, the post-Soviet space is marked by a rapid decline in the population due to a large death rate and a declining birth rate. In Russia, these demographic trends are embodied in a graphic that shows a declining birth rate superimposed over an increasing death rate. This graphic is quickly dubbed the “Russian cross,” [*russkii krest*]. As Oushakine (2007: 175) shows, this obsession with biological decline and of the nation as organism reflects both material and philosophical unease with the post-Soviet condition; the “organism” of the Russian ethnos constitutes both material evidence of organic culture and simultaneously serves as the embodiment of the a teleological principle that determines directions of the nation’s development (emphasis in original). These discourses of decline and decay provide a means of understanding constructions of national belonging in which positive means of nation building (“inventing traditions,” “imagining communities”) are not available or have been discredited.

Such a linkage of the biological conditions of the nation (both abstracted and as a collection of individuals) is a fundamental concern of Giorgio Agamben. His concept of bare life, developed most notably in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), holds that politics is founded upon that which it excludes from politics—the natural life that is simultaneously set outside the domain of the political but nevertheless implicated in it. This implication raises the question, then, of how life itself is politicized. Agamben sees this occurring through abandonment to an unconditional power of death, that is, to the power of sovereignty. It is in this abandonment of natural life to sovereign violence, to political life, that allows bare life to appear. Thus do modern political regimes constitute themselves through a discourse whereby “every people is doubled by a population; every democratic people is, at the same time, a demographic people (Agamben 1999: 84).

## **State and Economy**

This chapter traces economic practices in the region from the late Soviet times to the present. Because of its ill-defined political status, economic activity in the PMR has remained, for much of its existence, illicit and unregulated. Such economic activity is criminal from the perspective of the Moldovan state, profitable for well-connected investors from Russia or Ukraine, and simply a mundane phenomenon for residents. The region's economic flows have redirected by individuals occupying high positions within the state with political goals in mind.<sup>214</sup> Though one can make the argument that redistribution is what states do, I will show how in the PMR the economy constitutes a vital component of its performances of sovereignty. Initially, in the early 1990s, PMR state institutions sheltered the region from privatization and

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<sup>213</sup> The embrace of biological determinism after nearly seven decades of nurture over nature should illustrate both the uncertainty over the state of the nation and its population in post-Soviet Russia.

shock therapy. This allowed residents to believe that the region was immune to the precipitous economic decline that characterized the post-Soviet space. The PMR's booming economy, many residents believed, would help fulfill the region's political desires. To secure the long-term support of the Russian Federation, PMR authorities facilitated investment in strategic infrastructure by Kremlin-connected oligarchs. Russian ownership in energy-intensive industries such as steel and power generation offered benefits for all parties. Direct economic subsidies and cheap gas offered PMR authorities a means to finance government expenditures (residents pay for natural gas but the PMR never pays Russia for it). Through their ownership of energy-intensive industries, Russian oligarchs launder these subsidies through their holdings in the region. In terms of local capital accumulation, PMR authorities have allowed a monopoly holding company, Sheriff, to capture most if not all of the PMR economy. These material processes have generated practical and ideological effects. As a result of Ukrainian and Russian dominance of the economy (Ukraine is the source of most imports in the region and Russia the sole source of foreign aid), there now exists a body of knowledge that residents cite as a distinguishing feature of the region: the PMR operates on Russian standards, which are incompatible with Moldova's European ones.

Transnistria offers insights into sovereignty's changing forms in a globalized world. The PMR has commercialized its *de facto* sovereignty (Palan 2002) and functions as a "courtesan" (Mittelman and Johnston 1999) for Russian economic interests. Similarly, tax havens commercialize their sovereignty by providing important legal platforms for global finance and other types of services. Tax havens constitute an increasingly important, yet unrecognized, component of the state system that feeds upon recognized states' juridical and political infrastructure (Palan 2002: 172). These forms represent the two faces of globalization.

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<sup>214</sup> For more on how economic and cultural fields can also generate nationalism, see Verdery 1993.

“Courtesan” states provide for those who hold power but not for the citizenry at large; they remain beholden to interests that constrain them internationally, and occupy subordinate positions within the geopolitics of globalization.<sup>215</sup>

In both of these concepts one finds a conflict between economic liberalization and the state’s embeddedness in a situation capable of generating its own perversions. One needs only to look to Yugoslavia for an example of this. In its current form Bosnia is largely a result of the international community's insistence that it have a form of statehood that would enable international capital to flow freely (i.e., standard business regulations and tax regimes that allow companies to operate in Bosnia just as easily as in Singapore or Switzerland) (Hozic 2008). Economic interests, not Bosnians themselves, thus dictated Bosnia's form of statehood. Despite this professed openness, locals perpetuate internal barriers and legal idiosyncrasies to strengthen their own position. Similarly, in the PMR, Russia serves as the sole force capable of influencing the situation on the ground.<sup>216</sup> As a result, the unsettled political situation (with peacekeeping and security guaranteed by the Russian Federation) has generated economic formations and entities that profit from the status quo. As such, PMR state institutions remain oriented not around the free flow of capital, but around controlled economic flows and rents generated by them. Material interests become parasitic upon the region’s cultivated uncertainty, and in turn political actors and elites became beholden to these emboldened economic interests. Before addressing the present situation, it use useful to have a brief overview of the region’s economic development in the modern era.

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<sup>215</sup> "A state in its capacity as a courtesan is beholden to more powerful interests in the global political economy, submissive in its policies if not in rhetorical flourishes because choice is constrained, and engaged in illicit relationships (though the line between licit and illicit is increasingly faint)" (Mittelman and Johnston 1999: 117).

## From Suvorov to the Soviets: Transnistria, 1792-1989

The Russian general Alexander Suvorov founded Tiraspol as a garrison in 1792.<sup>217</sup> During Soviet times the city was a factory town, with heavy industry developing during the postwar period. The city boasted factories of union-wide significance that specialized in food production, light industry, textiles, furniture production, and military hardware. *Kvint*, Tiraspol's oldest wine and brandy distillery (founded in 1897), remains the oldest operating commercial enterprise in the region. Tiraspol's ties with industry are reflected locally — one a neighborhood is named for the local brick factory. Much of the region's housing stock consists of apartments and dormitories built by factories to house workers. One factory, *Elektromash*, produced not only electric machinery and pumps, but also political figures. Its former deputy director, Igor Smirnov, has been president of the PMR since 1990, and its former sports director heads the Interior Ministry's Migration department, the institution charged with issuing passports and handling registration. While these anecdotal connections between a single factory and the PMR's leadership are not representative, they outline an important relationship between economics (the control of capital, the distribution of property, and the production, distribution, and consumption of goods) and political authority.

The region's peculiarity must be seen in the context the region's post-1945 economic boom and how the end of the Soviet Union brought longstanding economic, social, and cultural anxieties to the surface. Soviet development was integral to the region. Transnistria played a key role in the Soviet defense sector. Four-fifths of the region's population was employed in industry, construction, and the service sector (King 2000: 183). Transnistria contained a disproportionate amount of infrastructure for its small size. A hydroelectric power plant in

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<sup>216</sup> The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors the peace agreement signed between Russia, Transnistria, and Moldova, with Ukraine as a guarantor.

Dubăsari, constructed in 1955, powered for the entire MSSR. In 1961, the Soviets build another large power plant in the left-bank city of Dnestrovsk. In the north, the MMZ steel works in Rîbnița (opened in 1984) is one of the most technologically advanced steel production facilities in Europe whose products are exported across the world.<sup>218</sup> In Soviet times, left-bank factories were key suppliers of technical equipment and arms for the Soviet military. The region's economic prosperity must be seen in the context of its union-wide function and dependence on the center for orders and financing.

Soviet development produced demographic changes as migrants from other regions of the Soviet Union arrived to work in the region's factories. In 1936, Russians constituted 14 percent of the totally population in districts [*raions*] along the Dniester River. By 1989 Russians made up a quarter of the population, though Moldovans still formed a plurality (Moldovans today are concentrated in villages along the Dniester River). The rural population was nearly sixty percent Moldovan, while the urban population was only a quarter Moldovan (King 2000: 183). Like most of the Soviet Union, Transnistria's urban areas were culturally and linguistically Russified. Residents tended to see themselves in the cultural context of the Soviet Union and later Russia (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 107).

The lines between the economy (the wealth and resources of the region) and politics (relations, assumptions, and contests relating to power and authority) began to blur with the onset of *perestroika* and national independence movements. As a part of the Soviet military-industrial complex, the region's economy tended to be seen in the Union-wide and later CIS context instead of Moldova. In the MSSR, infrastructure was oriented eastward, since Moldova was a

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<sup>217</sup> Today the city boasts a population of more than 150,000.

<sup>218</sup> Allegation of weapons production has also plagued the region and are cited by the West as a security issues that contributes to regional instability. Victor Bout, once one of the world's largest arms traffickers, was alleged to ship

border republic. Moldovan rapprochement with Romania threatened to disrupt the region's economy, and left-bank workers "reacted strongly against the disruption of economic ties among the various regions of the USSR that occurred in the late 1980s/early 1990s as the constituent republics became more independent" (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 107).

The rise of nationalism in Moldova and the 1989 language law making Moldovan the sole official language of the republic edged Transnistria down the path of separatism. Residents resented the fact that they contributed disproportionately to the MSSR, receiving less than 20% back from the center. In 1990, Transnistria accounted for 40% of the GDP of Soviet Moldova while it only had 15.2% of the population and, territorially, only 12.4% of the country.<sup>219</sup> During fieldwork, I encountered this sentiment often from left-bank residents who recalled the region's productivity vis-à-vis right-bank Moldova. "They [Moldovans] think that Chişinău built Tiraspol." This statement metonymically linked the two competing capital cities in Moldova but reversed their valence insofar the unrecognized capital disproportionately contributed to the MSSR budget.

The PMR economic distinctiveness vis-à-vis Moldova came to complement other means of belonging. In the PMR, belonging is constructed not on the basis of birth or nationality, but on the basis of fidelity insofar to Soviet internationalism given that there is no titular nationality in the PMR.<sup>220</sup> Often individuals narrated their paths to the PMR as a matter of choice. One informant had a rather circuitous journey insofar as he was born in Tiraspol, worked for over four decades in Chişinău, and returned to Transnistria as nationalists came to power in Moldova.

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his wares through the former Soviet airfield outside of Tiraspol. For more on this, see Peter Landesman's 2003 profile in the New York Times Magazine, "Arms and the Man."

<sup>219</sup> "Evolution of the Transnistrian Economy: critical appraisal," CISR Moldova 2001

<sup>220</sup> Igor Smirnov, the president of the PMR, arrived in the region in 1987. The Minister of State Security, Vladimir Antyufeyev, fled Latvia in August 1991 after being accused of numerous crimes in connection with the Latvian independence movement. He first fled to Russia, then traveled to the region in September 1991 under the alias



Over conversation, it became clear that the Chişinău he knew differed greatly from its contemporary form. His Chişinău had Soviet-era street names and parks. His demeanor piqued when he asked me about where I lived; he professed ignorance when I tried to explain where my apartment was located.<sup>221</sup> He returned to Transnistria in 1989 after Moldova adopted its language law. Later, when armed conflict broke out, he told of receiving a call from his daughter in the dormitory where he lived (he had given up his apartment in Chişinău). His daughter told him that she was leaving, i.e., going to live abroad. His response to her, in the imperative form, was a curt “don’t betray your motherland.” As he recounted this to me, his reply seemed rehearsed and devoid of emotion, as if it was a performance that required some amount of practice to come to grips with the act of replacing the familial bond with an ideological one. He himself spoke of returning home to Tiraspol because his motherland [*rodina*] demanded it. Yet even his idea of *rodina* was unsettled: in 1989 it was still the Soviet Union, but in 1992 it was the PMR. When I pointed this out, he dismissed it as unimportant and did not differentiate any further. The Soviet Union, having formally met its demise on December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1991, was, at the time his daughter called in 1992, a virtual polity, extant in its cumulative historical effects but without any tangible form. Not wanting to end on a debatable point, he stressed that the existence of the PMR was an objective fact - “the existence of the PMR is an objective fact [*suchshestvovanie PMR - eto ob’ektivnyi fakt*].

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Vladimir Shevtsov. He later organized the internal affairs and security organizations of the PMR. He is wanted by Interpol for his activities in Latvia and cannot travel to the EU due to a travel ban.

<sup>221</sup> Coincidentally, he had lived on the same street as I did. He lived on Youth Avenue [*prospekt molodezhi*]; today it is called Renaşterii Boulevard.

## **The Transnistrian Economy: 1989 and Beyond**

When the Moldovan national movement threatened the economic livelihood of left-bank residents, pro-independence movements in the Transnistrian region emerged in response to the threat of increased control from Chişinău. When Moldova passed the language law in 1989, political uncertainty had yet to affect the region's economy. At this point, national movements engulfed much of the USSR and threatened the status quo, but the Soviet state had not yet collapsed. Similarly, in early 1990 rapid de-industrialization had not begun and left-bank residents saw no reason to believe the region would not remain productive in the future.

Transnistria and Moldova experienced the same economic shockwaves that reverberated across the Soviet Union. These included the denomination of Soviet currency and hyperinflation, decreases (or outright stoppage) in production, the disappearance of state subsidies on basic goods, and price liberalization. Whole industries became noncompetitive due to technological backwardness, and the Soviet economy fractured along national lines. For comparison, the Russian economy lost 45% of its total output in 1989-1998. By 2005, Moldova had recovered less than 50% of its 1989 Soviet GDP (Popov 2007: 39).

Like much of the CIS, Transnistria experienced massive de-industrialization during the 1990s. Until 1992, Transnistria managed to avoid a sharp drop in production. While production in right-bank Moldova fell by 20%, Transnistria registered only a 6% decrease (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 112). In 1991, the standard of living in the region was among the highest in the CIS, though 1992 marks the onset of a serious recession. Armed conflict in 1992 decimated a large part of the region's infrastructure. As a landlocked region with few natural resources, Transnistria was adversely affected by the dismal Russian economy. Local enterprises remain dependent on imported raw material and the export of finished goods. De-industrialization, out-

migration, and the collapse of Soviet agriculture have left the region's economy insufficiently diversified. A single enterprise, the MMZ steel factory, generates the bulk of Transnistria's legitimate economic output.

Despite this precipitous decline, images of economic prosperity initially constituted one of the primary means of differentiating the PMR from Moldova. Transnistria's earliest efforts at political organizing were tied to the region's enterprises. Factory managers were among the first to act against steps toward political centralization by Chişinău.<sup>222</sup> To preserve a modicum of economic distinction vis-à-vis Moldova, the PMR state retained control over factories and other strategic enterprises in order to highlight economic differences vis-à-vis Moldova. Privatization occurred later than in Moldova, and the region's subsidized gas and electricity contribute to the belief that reintegration with Moldova will negatively affect residents.<sup>223</sup>

The PMR has successfully linked political questions to a series of simple economic questions that portray reintegration as a bad economic decision.<sup>224</sup> Who would willingly want to increase prices on natural gas, petroleum products, communal fees, and lose the Russian pension subsidies that put an extra fifteen dollars in the pockets of all pensioners, a significant portion of

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<sup>222</sup> "Already in the 1980s there developed a dynamic that would culminate in full-scale war by 1992: Every move in Chişinău that pulled the republic farther away from Moscow was met by a countermove in Transnistria that drew the region itself farther away from Chişinău. It was a dynamic replicated in several Soviet republics at the time. While central elites in the capital were arguing for greater control over local resources and the revival of indigenous languages, they were also initiating a policy of centralization within their own republics, attempting to gain control over local party and state institutions that might see Moscow – rather than the republican capitals – as the legitimate locus of authority. These centralization policies prompted their own movements for autonomy and independence within the republic. Although national symbols were the mobilizational tools wielded by political elites, the key issues were not symbols and national myths but rather real problems of political and economic control." (King 2000: 185).

<sup>223</sup> While residents pay for gas, it is at a significantly reduced rate compared to Moldova. Thus is the subsidy divided between PMR state coffers and residents who pay for their utilities each month.

<sup>224</sup> This project of creating political subjectivities through economic processes lies at the heart of European integration and the EU. Peebles (1997: 590) argues that EU law enshrines the rights of commodities rather than people, with people primarily gaining rights only by demonstrating that they embody exchange value and thus are personified commodities. "The EU treaties codify Marx's discovery about a previously hidden aspect of capitalist society, namely that "the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other" ... Humans

Transnistria's population?<sup>225</sup> The fact that nearly forty percent of the region's population are pensioners makes them the most important political constituency raises a set of interesting issues. While having a population that consists largely of pensioners socialized in the Soviet Union is a benefit for a state that professes to uphold Soviet ideals, this aged population generate little economic productivity are remain passive consumers of goods and services. Their lives are, according to one regular informant, calculated to the last kopeck. One elderly woman explained that life was better in Transnistria, since gasoline was less expensive than in Ukraine and Moldova. Knowing that she did not own a car, I asked her how she even knew the prices. She replied that the prices are shown each day on state television. Having no refineries, it might seem odd that gas is cheaper than in Odessa, which boasts significant refineries. Considering the fact that in the Russian Federation taxes constitute more than half of motor fuel prices, keeping gas prices low (and publicizing this fact) creates an implicit basis for comparison measured in simple economic terms. Economic superiority becomes an apparent fact of life in the region through the selective monetization this and other similar price differences highlighted by the media.

The economic policy of the PMR leadership has been dictated not so much by communist principles as by the need to maintain the support of the workers' organizations. The people, the holders of sovereignty in the PMR, must remain convinced that the state protects them. Debilitating economic reforms occurred earlier in Moldova; any such reform policy in Transnistria would have led to the closure of unprofitable enterprises and mass lay-offs. These reforms occurred only after the Russian financial crisis in 1998, when local capital began to be

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only fall within the scheme of EU law insofar as they are bearers of either the commodity labor power or the commodity money.”

<sup>225</sup> Pensioners make up a disproportionate part of the PMR population (the PMR's total population is between 370,000 and 520,000). Estimates vary, but approximately 35% to 40% of the PMR's total population are pensioners.

consolidated via privatization. Before then, privatization was not an option for PMR authorities — only after an economic crisis could social guarantees be abrogated.

### **Privatization: The Big Picture**

The Republic of Moldova adopted a law on privatization in December 1991. Though *de jure* part of Moldova, Moldovan authorities never led any privatization program in Transnistria. A 1997 regulation issued by the Supreme Soviet of Transnistria suspended privatization as “a predatory and anti-national action” (Gudim 2004). Such pronouncements offer residents an economic counterpoint to political disengagement: Moldova underwent privatization, and it became the poorest country in Europe. Logically, the PMR leadership prevented this from happening. As a presidential republic, Transnistria is similar to the Soviet state in that many legislative decisions are made on the basis of special orders and “decisions” that give individuals the right to transfer enterprises.<sup>226</sup> If you want to take control of any property in the region, you need connections in addition to capital. Given the fact that much of the region’s economy is concentrated in the hands of a single company, Sheriff, private capital remains weak.

Privatization occurred gradually in the region. In 2002, two enterprises were privatized, in 2003 – twelve, and in 2004 – sixteen. Among those privatized were the largest contributors to the PMR budget, including the Moldovan Metallurgical Works (MMZ), the Moldovan Regional Electric Power Station (Dnestrovsk), and various machine-building, light and food industries. MMZ was sold in 2004 to *Metalloinvest*, a Russian mining/metallurgy company controlled by the Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, and the Kuchurgan power station was sold in 2004 to

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<sup>226</sup> For more on the specifics of law and legal culture Russia, see Humphrey (2002: 107-109), specifically her description of Soviet law as an instrumental means of government. Soviet law did not require the consent of the public nor that of officials tasked with implementing the laws; it was largely composed of competing edicts and

*Inter RAO UES*, a company with connections to Boris Yeltsin's First Deputy Prime Minister, Anatoly Chubais. Since the late 1990s, Russian capital has controlled the most profitable assets of the region. This has allowed them to reap the benefits of the region's subsidized natural gas, since power plants and steel are heavily dependent upon natural gas.

At the local level, privatization secured and "legitimized" the property rights of local elites in the absence of a political settlement with Moldova. For heavily indebted factories, privatization wiped the slate clean by attracting funds for reconstruction and debt liquidation (and, as we shall see below, profitably "killing" these assets). Revenues generated by privatization formed an additional source of revenue for the state and those overseeing the process. Privatization was an attempt to legalize a property grab. The fact that the region's strategic assets were privatized by Russian capital plays into the hands of regional authorities seeking closer ties with Russia. Privatization shields the PMR against the claims of Moldovan authorities who maintain that only they have the legal right to privatize property in the region. The fact that privatization occurred when it did shows that statehood had been successfully consolidated and the next step of establishing "democracy" could be undertaken.<sup>227</sup>

One informant stressed the shortened timeframe of capital consolidation in the region: "What took place over the course of a hundred years in America happened here in ten." Himself a businessman who travelled with armed security, he was well aware of the bloodshed associated with primitive accumulation of capital. Of the local businesses not owned by Russian investors, Sheriff, owns the majority. By strategically allowing Kremlin-connected investors to purchase electrical-generating infrastructure and the region's industrial crown jewel, the MMZ steel

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regulations that supplemented and superseded existing laws (which continued the tsarist traditions of rule by decree).

<sup>227</sup> Only after privatization did political parties proliferate, of which there are ten today. Sheriff, the regional monopoly holding company, created two political parties and is rumored to control others.

factory, the PMR had become a dependent state that could now claim poverty when its gas debt of more than \$2 billion dollars came due, since the Russian-owned enterprises drew up the region's gas debt. Russian aid to the region is both charity to the Transnistrian people who are squeezed by an economic blockade and a subsidy for connected investors. As a place that is simultaneously outside of (yet an integral component to) any recognized authority (be in Moldovan or Russian), the region functions as an integral economic cog that allows Russian capital to realize a profit. There is a division of labor in the PMR economy: Sheriff captures internal markets, and Russia investors retain strategic infrastructure to launder subsidies from the Russian state. The natural gas bill remains unpaid, and its exponential growth serves as a deterrent to any political settlement, as the current gas debt of more than two billion dollars is roughly equal to one third of Moldova's GDP.

### **Privatization: From Below**

Privatization condensed many of the economic issues addressed above. In this section I address how residents spoke of the privatization process.<sup>228</sup> One informant, Vadim, told me about how privatization worked at his factory. Each worker received a share, and there was a meeting between management and workers to decide the fate of the factory. The director laid out a purchasing offer, and told the workers the amount each would receive for selling. Though Vadim could not recall the exact amount, he thought it was around twenty dollars. At that time, he explained, the factory was still organized in its Soviet-era collective structure. When the decision came up for a vote, some workers wanted to retain their shares and receive dividends, should the factory become profitable. The meeting was temporarily adjourned. One dissenter was

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<sup>228</sup> Nobody would speak specifically about personal involvement, and I was unable to interview any government officials involved in the process.

pulled aside and told, in no uncertain terms, that if he did not sell and acquiesce he would soon be “feeding fish” in the Dniester, a not so subtle reference to the many corpses that turned up in the river during the 1990s. He acquiesced. The individual who purchased the workers’ shares was a straw man [*podstavlenoe litso*], someone who purchases an asset on behalf of another (in this case Sheriff). The possibility of manipulation [*makhinatsiia*], forever lurks in the shadows of the Transnistrian economy. Later, over tea, Vadim educated me in the nuances of post-Soviet politics, explaining didactically that one can never understand the essence of events [*sut’ sobytii*], as reality could always be manipulated or altered.

Another scheme for making a bankrupt enterprise profitable occurs by literally dismembering it. A buyer purchases an unprofitable factory and takes out a large line of credit, ostensibly to revive the failing enterprise. Usually, this sum would be enough to cover the enterprise’s debts, with money left over for payroll and the purchase of equipment. The owner would then embezzle the money and return a percentage to whoever approved the loan and the initial purchase. Having exhausted the line of credit, the owner would declare the enterprise bankrupt and fire the workers. Some time later, a straw man would purchase the factory for a nominal price (as low as a few dollars) and then sell off the remaining assets. Larger factories often included a health clinic, sports facilities, dormitories, apartments, and other property such as a vacation resort in addition to the factory itself. Now freed from their obligations to provide services to the workers, these assets could be rented, sold, or turned into independent units for generating revenue. The ultimate stop of privatization entails literally stripping the factory of equipment and scrap metal and shipping it to a buyer in Russia or the CIS. Local firms specialize in logistics and shipping. The inheritance of the people – the factories that provided for and allowed residents to differentiate themselves and the region economically – is literally stripped



away. Though blatantly illegal, there are no consequences as long as the right payoffs are made. Given the general lack of a clear property title as a result of socialist practice and easily manipulated shareholder registries, one can argue that both state administrators and managers of state enterprises had little incentive enforce property rules and regulations (Varese 1997). Historically, reforms that foster an efficient functioning of the economy only emerge in response to pressure from property holders (Hay *et al* 1996: 564). Given the fact that all enterprises were owned by the state, is it any wonder that the process would be grossly inefficient at best, thoroughly criminal at worst? Those who are aware of these schemes have no recourse and no incentive to get involved, which would only spell trouble. Simple workers are powerless when faced with the profit-seeking impetus of capital. Residents, attuned to the rhetoric of crisis, are unwilling or unable to acknowledge the economic predation happening before their own eyes. They chose the blue pill.

Privatization of the region's most valued assets occurred under murky circumstances, and residents understood that officials profited from the transactions. Far from equitably distributing assets, privatization enabled a cadre of connected individuals to gain control of the profitable enterprises in the region for a fraction of their assessed value. During an interview, the head of the Transnistrian Community Party stressed how authority, *vlast*, remains separate from the people.

We have a situation in which power is separate from the people. [Those in] power earn and enrich themselves, and the people and the state live in poverty. Pensions are \$80! You can imagine what that is like. Those who steal have millions, and others have nothing. Our goal is to come to power, to create favorable living conditions. We will not destroy private property ... We will concentrate on those oligarchs who illegally privatized state property. Take, for example, the KVINT cognac factory. They sold it to Sheriff for 20 million dollars, when it was valued at nearly 500 million dollars. Somebody put the remaining money in their pocket. The Moldova Steel Works (MMZ), the printing and paper factory [he continues to list assets] ... We want to return all of them to the state. They generate real

income that goes directly into the pockets of the oligarchs (personal interview, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

He distinguishes between the state and those occupying its institutions. Far from not believing in the state, he saw state institutions as co-opted by individuals. These individuals, not the state, were to blame for the situation. There existed a simple remedy: return the state to its rightful role as a re-distributor by revisiting these corrupt deals. Far from the state withering away under communism, his experiences in Soviet times led to expectations vis-à-vis the state that today remain unfulfilled. Not sufficiently providing for its citizens, state institutions had been deformed under false pretenses. Those at the helm of the state can only sell its assets, not provide for its citizens. The people, in his words, are a means for the enrichment of the authorities: *biomassa*. Recognition is unimportant for those in power despite its constant invocation as the cornerstone of political discourse.

The authorities do not care whether or not Transnistria is recognized. They do not care about the people [literally, they spit on the people –*plevat*']. They will pack their suitcases and leave [when this ends].

The demands of performative sovereignty lead to a situation in which economic issues remain buried beneath the “political issues” of international recognition.

During research, activists involved in the early strike movement stressed the fact that the idea of political separation emerged only after Moldova rejected their overtures for economic autonomy. As early as 1989, there was talk about a free-economic zone (along the lines of the Estonian model during late *perestroika*). Between its industries, food production, and power generation, in 1989 Transnistria was an amazingly productive region. Today, however, residents speak not of the economic differences but of systemic ones, since for nearly two decades the PMR and Moldova had developed their own “system” – economic rules, educational system, political, legal, etc. The PMR uses Russian standards, while Moldova operates according to

European standards. This idea of a system and its concomitant systemic base of knowledge was used in discussion of education, language, culture, politics, foreign affairs, and any other sphere in which disagreements, collective or individual, could potentially be found.

### **Local Capital Accumulation: Sheriff**

Political disengagement has been profitable to a few local businesses. The isolationist policies of PMR authorities vis-à-vis Moldova have allowed a local holding company, Sheriff, to forge an unchallenged monopoly in the region.<sup>229</sup> Sheriff was founded by two state security officers who started a business to support the families of other policemen. In the 1990s, they began taking over the booming cigarette smuggling business.<sup>230</sup> At that time locals made money smuggling cigarettes from Ukraine to Transnistria and onward to Europe. Gradually, Sheriff took over other informal businesses that generated significant income (cigarettes, liquor, frozen chicken legs). In the words of one resident, Sheriff was untouchable: “Nobody could touch them because they had significant contacts with the police and military as well as with the MGB,” the feared Ministry of State Security. Sheriff took over the business opportunities that allowed residents to make money in the aftermath of the war. Like many successful businesses in the former Soviet Union, who actually stands behind Sheriff remains a mystery; its two owners are well-known figures, but it is unclear what control they exercise. Some residents believe that members of the President’s family are silent partners, while others say that Sheriff is the economic arm of the “power ministries.”

Sheriff’s dominance can be traced to 1996 when it concluded a contract on “mutual cooperation” with the PMR government. This arrangement created the preconditions for

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<sup>229</sup> In the PMR there is an economic division of labor. Russian investors own the strategic infrastructure (electricity generation, the power grid) while Sheriff controls the local consumer goods, both retail and wholesale.

monopolizing trade in the region. President Igor Smirnov “recommended” that the state rent the largest (and most profitable) state food stores to Sheriff. At the time, these stores were stocked with local products and patronized because of their prices, selection, and locations. They were Soviet-style stores, with separate counters for each department, but they functioned. Gradually, they were closed and replaced by western-style Sheriff supermarkets. For closing its competition, Sheriff was rumored to have paid a half-million dollars up front and monthly financial aid to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars.<sup>231</sup> Sheriff’s monopoly was not built upon ingenuity or hard work, but upon connections, that most valuable commodity in the former Soviet Union.<sup>232</sup>

Sheriff’s business grew to cover a wide variety of industries and include a network of supermarkets, gas stations, and Moldova’s most successful football club, which boasts a massive training complex and stadium outside the city.<sup>233</sup> Sheriff controls a large regional bank in addition to owning the sole telephone (fixed *and* mobile) and internet service provider in the region. Other businesses include textiles, broadcast television, cable/satellite television, auto sales, publishing, cognac production, bread making, meat/poultry production, milk production, aquaculture, second-hand clothing, light manufacturing, and a local advertising firm.

Sheriff has its own customs broker and logistics company that serves as an intermediary for other small businesses. One informant told me of a friend who was looking to import kegs of beer to sell during the hot summer months. After formalizing the details of his business plan, he scheduled a meeting with Sheriff. He was directed to the office of an executive who explained

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<sup>230</sup> Smuggling was prevalent (and profitable) in both left and right-bank Moldova.

<sup>231</sup> These numbers should not be seen as exact figures. But given the times, they should be seen for what they are: extremely large sums of money paid to alter the fundamental dynamics of market processes in the region. Figures cited in *Krasnaya Zvezda*, December 7, 2001. “Republic of Sheriff” Orest Kollontai.

<sup>232</sup> For more on the importance of informal connections and institutions in the post-Soviet period, see Ledevena 1998 and 2006.

<sup>233</sup> Just as PMR exports to Europe go there with Moldovan customs stamps, when Sheriff plays in the European Champions League, they play under the Moldovan flag. When the Moldovan international team plays a home match, they play it in Tiraspol at Sheriff stadium, since it is the only FIFA approved stadium in Moldova.

how business would proceed: Sheriff would import the beer trucks through their own customs yard, and he would be responsible for paying a fixed fee per truck. Sheriff would handle the documents, logistics, and conveyance to and from the customs yard. He would not be paying the state customs yard, but rather Sheriff for the privilege of conducting business. The terms of the deal were not negotiable, and it was made clear to him that there would be consequences if he proceeded without Sheriff. Whether you run a small market or kiosk, you purchase your inventory at one of Sheriff's wholesale depots. Sheriff makes sure that wholesale prices on certain goods remain high for their competitors in the retail business to ensure that people continue to patronize their supermarkets.



**Fig 10.** Photo of a typical Sheriff supermarket in Tiraspol, PMR. Photo by author.

Sheriff supermarkets are known for their creative expiration dates. Friends warned me to avoid dairy products, as it was common knowledge that they would buy expired stock, change the expiration dates, and sell it as fresh. Since Moldovan imports were prohibitively taxed, Sheriff had no competition and could dictate the terms of sale, since no alternative suppliers could exist in the region.<sup>234</sup> Sheriff is also known for its harsh treatment of workers, and due to the precarious economic situation they have an unlimited reserve of labor in the region. In the alcohol section, all wine and liquor (except wine from Moldova) have no customs stamps; cigarettes sold in Sheriff also have no customs stamps. Many products found in Sheriff are counterfeit; one foreign researcher visiting a Tiraspol colleague purchased a counterfeit Colgate toothbrush that resulted in bleedings gums and deodorant that left a rash. The emergence of the region as a sop for imported gray-market foodstuffs has decimated local food producers, as their products are now unprofitable. Despite having some of the most productive agricultural land in Moldova, the region imports a disproportionate amount of its food. As the first western-style supermarket in the region, Sheriff's consumerist offers index civility. Consistency and the ubiquitous chain store, the bane of consumerism in the America, indexes progress itself. Shopping as civilization.

Sheriff makes life difficult for small businesses.<sup>235</sup> One small business owner I interviewed had \$500 worth of cigarettes confiscated simply because they had Ukrainian customs stamps (the cigarettes were purchased locally). A recent law (rumored to have been passed at the behest of Sheriff) made the sale of Ukrainian cigarettes illegal. This rule forced smokers to purchase

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<sup>234</sup> Currently, Moldovan imports are taxed at a rate of 100%, essentially making them uncompetitive.

<sup>235</sup> Though some might see this as the inherent competition in capitalism, the significant political and legislative power possessed by Sheriff insulates them from any potential competition. The situation is much more akin to a state-supported monopoly. The PMR is small enough and the cost barrier associated with establishing a market presence high enough to limit competition. Challenging Sheriff simply is not feasible given their cozy relationship with PMR authorities.

contraband tobacco products supplied, of course, by Sheriff. Consequently, cigarettes with Ukrainian customs stamps increased in value, since they were seen as unadulterated. Demand swelled, and customs officials on the PMR's eastern border with Ukraine were directed to intercept shipments. It was common knowledge that border guards themselves preferred Ukrainian cigarettes. Once it was clear that this regulation was not being effectively enforced, Sheriff put its own employees on the border to monitor the situation. The border, the physical limit of the state's coercive powers, was policed by those serving not a state institution that held a monopoly on violence, but a quasi-state institution that held a monopoly on trade. Despite Sheriff's best efforts, smokers can still find Ukrainian cigarettes. The cigarettes for sale in Sheriff supermarkets look almost exactly like the Ukrainian brands previously available. The packaging is the same, though some have fake duty-free stickers: duty free Philippines, Dubai, and, perhaps most curiously, "North Africa."

If one works in a business owned by Sheriff, one can choose to receive one's salary through a local debit card, *Raduga* (rainbow), which allows one to receive a 3% discount at Sheriff and other Sheriff-controlled stores. With the *Raduga* card you can access the local network of ATMs that operate only in the PMR. Having no competition, Sheriff uses its monopoly to take a cut at every step of the process, ensuring that pensioners spend the majority of their monthly disbursement at its stores by targeting them for discount programs that other retailers cannot afford, ensuring that its employees patronize its other businesses, and that it profits every time someone speaks on a phone or uses the internet. Thanks to its charitable programs for seniors, Sheriff pays a much lower effective tax rate than its competitors.





**Fig. 11.** Sheriff Stadium at night. Constructed in 2002 at an estimated cost of \$200 million, the main stadium can seat over 13,000. The stadium complex occupies more than 40 hectares and consists of the main stadium plus five other fields, numerous training fields, a covered arena for winter use, and a soccer academy to develop local talent, and residences for players. Many of the Moldovan national team's matches are played here.



**Fig. 12.** Billboard advertising FC Sheriff, Sheriff's football team. FC Sheriff plays in the Divizia Națională, the top division in Moldovan football. In addition to being a seven-time winner of the Moldovan Cup, FC Sheriff regularly plays in the UEFA Champions League, Europa League, and other tournaments such as the CIS Cup. Photo by author.



Sheriff has created a diffuse economic structure that blurs the line between business and politics. On paper, it is a holding company, a company that owns other companies' outstanding stock. Yet in reality, Sheriff is a company that has profited from close relations to the state. Its low tax burden, its widely publicized charity programs for pensioners, and its ubiquitous corporate logo (an old Western-style sheriff's badge) lend it an aura of invincibility within the region. Sheriff's name and logo perhaps best exemplify how in the PMR the law truly exists solely at the level of representation. Sheriff illustrates how the law functions as an icon, a corporate logo, a symbol of a brand that alludes to what is lacking in the PMR (the law as an objective tool of justice) yet which remains ubiquitous at the symbolic level. Locals readily accept the Sheriff supermarket chain as "ours," settled custom in the region.<sup>236</sup>

In both the consolidation of the PMR's sovereignty and the emergence of Sheriff, one notices two deft acts of substitution with wide resonance in the PMR. As a set of state institutions, the PMR can lay claim to two key victories. On the one hand, with Russian support, the PMR successfully repelled Moldovan aggression, eliminated its primary sovereign competition and negated the potentially deleterious effects a Moldovan national state might have had on the region – or at least on the members of the Transnistrian elite. On the other hand, by internally consolidating their power and eliminating (or supplanting) a visible criminal element, the PMR's authorities disarmed the externally generated discourse of criminality. Sheriff is an indirect result of eliminating competition both in the licit and illicit economies. Intimately linked with the state project (insofar as it is both a symptom and a product of the PMR's unique position), Sheriff has transformed the absence of law (i.e., Transnistria as a "black hole") into an

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<sup>236</sup> The concept of ours [*nashe*] denotes something that is considered to be ours or local. It is opposed to the foreign. As an adjective, *nashe* can be applied to consumer goods, ideas, formal/informal institutions, accepted social standards, currencies, food products, etc. It is important to note the policing mechanism implicit in this idea: that

excess of it insofar as Sheriff substitutes consumerism for its illicit gains (crime). Ironically, the criminal is the Sheriff. This substitution is neither virtual nor discursive but real - its economic monopoly could only be realized in tandem with the political processes described above. Yet when measured against the social and economic decay left by the collapse of the Soviet state, the consumerist offerings of Sheriff point to the (real or imagined) economic prowess of the PMR itself. The fact that Sheriff is local only serves to insulate it from criticism.

### **Economic Fictions: Blockades, Sovereignty, and Revenue**

In November 2002, the PMR introduced a 20% duty on Moldovan imports. Four months later the PMR introduced migration controls for foreign citizens entering, leaving and transiting the territory of Transnistria. In 2003, the fee for non-residents was set at a rate of 3.4 PMR rubles, i.e. 7 Moldovan Lei or about fifty cents (today the fee is around \$1.60) (CISR 2003: 19). To gather this fee, migration posts were built on the borders of Moldova and Ukraine. In less than a month, these posts generated more than seven million dollars, a not insubstantial sum for the PMR budget. More importantly, state agents could collect tribute, since foreigners were now at the mercy of customs, migration, and security officials who could exploit this legal uncertainty for personal gain.<sup>237</sup> Registration procedures added yet another material dimension to the reality of the PMR and afforded a new revenue stream for bureaucrats and guards. When crossing the border, foreigners must pass through three separate bureaucracies (state security, migration control, and finally customs), each with their own rules, regulations, and prices, should any

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which is not ours is foreign and often threatening by definition. This is perhaps all the more important in a place like the PMR

<sup>237</sup> A state positions such as a border guard or customs officer is commonly referred to as an income-giving place [*doxodnoe mesto*]. The benefits received (money, gifts, or services) are tribute [*dan*']. Humphrey (2004: 429) discusses how tribute in the post-Soviet world constitutes both a “technology of sovereignty” that cannot be separate from the wider symbolic imaginary of urban survival in Ulan-Ude, Russia. Among expatriates in Chişinău, I heard stories of individuals paying “fines” in excess of 150 Euros, more than twice the monthly salaries for border guards.

irregularities be found. I once asked a state security officer why foreigners needed to pass through these duplicate bureaucracies, and she rubbed her fingers together, the universal sign for money. After monetizing the stream of people crossing the PMR border, goods subsequently followed.

In July 2003, Transnistria introduced a 100% customs duty for all goods imported to the region from Moldova. This action signaled a complete switch of trade to shadow economy, since legitimate trade with Moldova was now economically unfeasible. In essence, Transnistria sought to disengage fully from Moldova and conduct trade through solely through Ukraine. In March of 2006, in response to EU requirements and a European Commission memo on combating illicit activities, Ukraine introduced new customs regulations on its western border with the PMR by declaring that it would only accept goods from the PMR with proper Moldovan documentation. From 1996 until 2001, Transnistria freely exported with customs seals provided by Chişinău — these goods were not subject to Moldovan taxes. In return, PMR authorities were to establish joint customs centers with Moldova on the Ukrainian border (Moldovan officials were forbidden from entering the PMR). Despite this unfulfilled obligation, the PMR used Moldovan customs seals freely until new ones were introduced in 2006.

This dispute over economic regulation boiled into a political event as Ukraine began to accept only the new Moldovan customs documents for PMR exports in March 2006. The change in documentation emerged in response to demands from the EU to regulate Moldovan exports in conjunction with EU trade preferences. As a project in the service of a common economic market, bringing Moldova into the European market meant regulating trade. What was from the European perspective a technocratic decision was seen as an “economic blockade” in Transnistria. This idea of a blockade illustrates how tangible steps toward integration with

Moldova on somebody else's terms become politicized. Protests were organized, with factories, community organizations, youth organizations, and various Cossack forces participating in public demonstrations. Acquaintances told of being released from work obligations and transported to the central square to protest, with banners and materials prepared in advance. In response to the blockade, Russian political parties and community organizations sent an aid convey from Russia to Tiraspol, whose arrival was celebrated as another public example of how Russia supports Transnistria during times of crisis. The Russian State Duma recognized the events as a "blockade" and warned that events might lead to a "humanitarian disaster."

The "blockade" became a means of reinforcing the idea of residents as a separate people threatened by its neighbors. This sequence of events illustrates how a decision in the realm of taxation becomes the basis for a political event of significance for residents. Though this is not unusual — after all, this is how international trade is conducted — the peculiarities of the PMR required a collective response to this shift that challenged their economic independence. This event became an opportunity to once again perform its sovereignty to itself and to outsiders. While in reality the blockade was more real than virtual, its effects are talked about years later. To many, the political aspect seemed unimportant: what was important was that the community came together (even if they had to be bussed or otherwise induced to).

From the perspective of the Moldovan state, left-bank businesses could easily avoid this blockade. Firms wishing to export with Moldovan customs seals must simply register in Chişinău. Temporary registration documents are easily obtained, and the tax burden for these newly registered companies is negligible, according to Moldovan officials. This "blockade" generated significant good will for PMR authorities insofar as it further contributing to the mutual distrust between left- and right-bank Moldova. In a New Year's address in 2006, PMR

President Igor Smirnov declared that the PMR lost more than \$420 million dollars during the blockade, a number that exceeds some estimates of Transnistria's GDP.

Residents' memory was selective. Certain facts went unacknowledged in the context of the blockade. Local activists, bystanders, and deputies in the Supreme Soviet who could cite by memory agreements and memorandums on taxation between Moldova and Transnistria professed ignorance when I brought up the fact that the PMR essentially blocks Moldovan products by making them economically unprofitable through a 100% tax. Beer produced sixty-seven kilometers away in Chişinău costs substantially more than Russian, Ukrainian, and European beer in at a market in Tiraspol. Far from allowing for a clear understanding of regional economic issues, the sense of siege allows for the messy details to fade away and for the political community to be reconstituted. Important details – who profits when Moldovan imports are shut out of the PMR, who gains politically when they greet the Russian aid convey, and what popular expectations emerge when residents hear outsized estimates of lost revenue – become secondary. What is important is who helped Transnistrians in their time of need (Russia) and who caused this situation (Moldova, Ukraine, and the EU). The losses from this "economic blockage" are useful fictions, constituting a huge percent of its GDP. They are part of a performative project built upon individuals' own experiences in the PMR.

This dispute over economic regulation by Moldova and the framing of the issue as a "blockade" points to the ideological successes of the PMR state. In the face of a two-decades long uncertainty, residents saw this blockade as Moldovan aggression. The language and rhetoric used to describe the blockade was violent: bringing Transnistria to its knees, strangling the Republic. When confronted with the reality of the tens of thousands of protesters (despite the fact that these protesters were ordered [*zakazany*]) and viewed alongside the pronouncements of the

PMR leadership, residents described the protests as the spontaneous, collective expression of the people. One protest organizer, experienced in information warfare and propaganda, spoke with pride about the protests success at the symbolic level. Residents freely utilize the images, ideologies, and constructs circulating in the media and in political discourse. While some do not accept these forms as such, their stable existence in the media leads to passive rhetorical use in an uncritical manner by residents. These local images remain at odds with the political lexicon of Moldova, which seeks closer ties with Europe.

### **Systemic Differences**

The objective differences between the PMR and Moldova emerged as a result of their divergent trajectories in the post-Soviet period. In the introduction, I wrote of how the PMR functions as a system that functions above the individual that displaces blame and evacuates agency. In the economic realm this systematic ordering of reality according to Russian standards has a practical component. Since their initial separation Moldova and the PMR have had different mechanisms of economic management. Moldova's economy is now dominated by the private sector, while in Transnistria the economy initially was state-driven. Similarly, in Moldova market-based methods of regulation are practiced while in Transnistria close administrative regulation of enterprises remained the norm until privatization.

In Moldova agriculture is based on private property; land can be freely bought and sold. Under the PMR Constitution all land belongs to the state. A 2003 referendum on the introduction of private land ownership did not pass due to low voter turnout.<sup>238</sup> One local businessman seeking investors for a real estate venture told me that despite there being no law on private property, any potential investment with him would be secure, since he had good connections

with the state. In the PMR, the state controls access to land. Residents who are citizens permanently residing in Transnistria can lease land for 99 years. The lack of a clear private property regime allows the state to, in effect, ratify every potential transaction. Whether it is the privatization of an apartment, a simple land-lease, an agricultural venture, or construction, the state can potentially intercede in any transaction, or at any step of the process. Literally, the physical basis of the region is subject to the whims of PMR state institutions and its bureaucracy.<sup>239</sup>

The basis for receiving state benefits differs as well. While modern, private pension systems have emerged in Moldova, the state disburses all pensions in Transnistria; Moldova is moving in the direction of a free-market, European pension system. In Transnistria, pensioners (of an estimated 370,000 residents, more than 150,000 are pensioners) receive additional Russian “humanitarian aid” along with other discounts (e.g., Sheriff’s senior discount program). Officials from the Moldovan Ministry of Reintegration classify pension supplements, *dobavki*, as Russian support for separatism, since people receive material benefits (\$15 per month) channeled through the PMR state.<sup>240</sup> Left-bank politicians deny this despite the visible breakdown on pension stubs clearly specifying what part of the pension comes from the PMR and what comes from Russia. Pensioners are thus reminded where the extra money comes from and are left to fret what might happen should the situation change.

Living in Transnistria confers other benefits on residents. Utilities are cheaper in Transnistria, which pays lower, non-market rates for electricity, gas, and communal tariffs.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> It should be noted that this is the only referendum ever to fail in the PMR.

<sup>239</sup> Property right and stock ownership remain notoriously difficult to define even today in many post-Soviet countries. For an overview of how ill-defined property right affected the transition to capitalism in Russia, see Varese 1997, particularly 590-592.

<sup>240</sup> Russia gives this aid to all pensioners living in the PMR regardless of what foreign passport they hold.

<sup>241</sup> In 2009, Transnistrians paid \$0.08 per cubic meter of gas and \$0.04 per kWh of electric power. In Moldova electric power is three times more expensive, gas - four times. As the tariffs are several times lower than the price on

Cheap natural gas subsidizes industries like bread making, while the porous border and large informal economy keep Sheriff supermarkets stocked with imported foodstuffs. Any change is seen as threatening due to residents' already precarious existence, since change can be measured in simple economic terms. Charity and social benefits are indirectly politicized insofar as receiving any category of benefits requires Transnistrian citizenship. Russian citizenship offers benefits and is easily obtained. Well-connected Russian passport holders can, for a price, get registered [*propisano*] in Russia, which allows them to receive an additional pension from the Russian Federation. The supply of natural gas from Russia indirectly finances the PMR, since the region does not pay Gazprom for gas that residents themselves pay for. The government accepts payment, but the external gas debt continues to grow. Far from being unrecognized or non-existent in a *de jure* form, this performative polity is real to residents. The PMR state provides the subsidies, economic benefits, and the ideological framework required for a coherent existence. In light of the significant external subsidies, Transnistria is more aptly seen as a dependent state that proclaims its independence and performing its sovereignty to its citizens.

Transnistria challenges the narrative of an open, integrated Europe in the same way that the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad did before EU expansion in 2004. In the run up to the EU's eastward expansion Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave bordered by Lithuania and Poland, was similarly constructed as a potential zone of instability, with rampant smuggling, infectious diseases, unsecured arms caches, and uncontrolled population flows threatening the European

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the Russian gas supplied to Transnistria, the PMR is not able to pay completely for gas supplied by the Gazprom. As a result, the debt reached \$2 billion. Gazprom cannot apply any sanctions, as the PMR is not recognized and for the reason that the transit gas main goes through Transnistria westwards (its disconnection may result in the violation of the Russian concern's commitments to foreign partners). For more on this, see Chamberlain-Creanga and Allin 2010 and Bruce and Yafima 2009.



Union.<sup>242</sup> Like the Kaliningrad question, Transnistria sheds light on what occurs when a supranational polity like the EU runs into the unsettled territorial and economic realities of the post-Soviet world. Implicit in this normative frame is the idea of internationality, the idea that the nation-form is the global standard for territorial control.<sup>243</sup> This idea of territory and internationality is itself the product of a capitalism that has carved up the world into property owned by states. Wars are fought over ownership and control of territories, with the profit motive playing a large historic role in determining where and when conflicts arise.

From the EU perspective, Transnistria is an entity in need of economic discipline and commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998). In 2008, I interviewed two deputies from the PMR Supreme Soviet who were skeptical of EU's stated intentions to integrate the region by allowing it access to the common EU market. Both saw integration as a way to usurp their means of governance. Based on 2008 figures, the EU is Moldova's largest trading partner, accepting nearly 48% of Moldovan exports; Russia is Moldova's second largest export destination (29%) (Eurostat 2009).<sup>244</sup> When I asked about the EU role in the region, specifically the new Moldovan trade regime,<sup>245</sup> both deputies stressed how disruptive this regime was. In the words of one deputy, Ukraine, under its pro-American leaders (this was 2008, the last years of Yushchenko's Orange Revolution), signed onto the blockade and led what he described as an economic "genocide" against its own people, citing the fact that many residents are also Ukrainian citizens.

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<sup>242</sup> "Despite the use of the 'black hole' rhetoric, the EU's concerns in Kaliningrad were primarily economic. In 2001, the region's per capita income was five hundred dollars, five times less than Lithuania's and forty times less than the EU average" (Krickus 2001: 125).

<sup>243</sup> "[Internationality is] a style of thought and global social organisation that tries to generate a plurality of nations, in order that, for any piece of land, and for any human being, there should be a definite answer to the question 'which nation is responsible?' Internationality, you might say, is the tendency for the global imposition of the nation-form." (Jonathan Rée, 992: 9–10). Benedict Anderson (1991: 19) similarly argues that modern "state sovereignty is fully, flatly and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory."

<sup>244</sup> These numbers are based on goods exported with Moldovan customs documents.

<sup>245</sup> Under the new Moldovan regulations, exports were accepted only with the new Moldovan custom stamps. The Moldovan customs stamps that the PMR had used freely before were now invalid.

He stressed that all negative information about smuggling was ordered [*zakazany*], and paid for by the West. Furthermore, he added, such misinformation must be viewed in terms of the competition between the United States and Russia. He seamlessly segued into a discussion of the economic blockade and how the issue of EU trade preferences was but a ruse to bring the PMR under Moldovan control. To illustrate this point, he gave the issue of how EU trade preferences for apples are only valid in February. Until February, the apples must be stored, since you cannot supply them earlier. He asked whether this made sense, since apples are harvested from June until October – why should they only be sold in February? This would require storage and infrastructure. From his perspective, the benefits of the European market are outweighed by the costs required to comply with its regulations.

Another deputy told of numerous problems introduced by the Moldovan customs regime for his constituents. Since the 2005 customs regime went into effect, managers at the MMZ steel factory have been required to export through Moldova with Moldovan railroad wagons. He told of receiving angry calls from managers at the factory who had to pay Moldovan bureaucrats to provide the needed cars. Previously, they had exported directly through Ukraine and onward to Russia. Due to the new customs regime, managers at MMZ must arrange transport through Chişinău, pay to arrange the wagons, and then transport their goods through a checkpoint in Moldova before turning around to head to Ukraine or Russia. EU trade preferences turned a previously simple economic transaction into a circuitous journey that required navigating two contradictory bureaucracies, each with their own interests. The agreement between Moldova and the EU (with Ukraine's support) forced PMR economic output to be re-routed through Moldovan state institutions where they were now subject to the standard post-Soviet bribes and bureaucratic rent seeking. What is important from the perspective of Transnistrian economic entities is that

the previous way of doing business is now impossible, since they are not fully part of an economy controlled by a single state. The change in the customs regime opens what was once solely a Transnistrian source of revenue to the prying hands of a “foreign” authority. While he did not deny there were benefits, he resented the fact that money flows from the PMR to those uninvolved in the production process.

Crises offer a powerful means of motivation. The crises experienced by region (most notably the 1992 war, along with numerous blockades, floods, and droughts) are caused by outsiders, by those seeking to liquidate PMR statehood, or they are acts of God. These catastrophes are avoided only through the ingenuity of local politicians and with the beneficence of the Russian Federation. Unable to repay Russia, the PMR repays its debt symbolically through a pro-Russia ideology and by defending Russian interests. This pro-Russian ideology is paraded publicly and dispersed throughout society. It remains available whenever disputes or irregularities arise. Fealty to Russia is ritualized means of assuaging geopolitical anxieties or denying agency or complicity.

As a polity that exists outside any recognized legal framework, the PMR threatens the stable jurisdictional boundaries of a united Europe and raises the question of who is responsible for regulating the region’s economic outputs? Though legally part of the Republic of Moldova, Russia exercises the primary means of control through its subsidized natural gas that finances the regional budget. Russia provides a yearly aid to Transnistria, with figures ranging from 30 million to over 200 million dollars.<sup>246</sup> Though a small, visible portion of this aid is earmarked for vulnerable sections of the population (mostly to pensioners and orphans), the vast majority is

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<sup>246</sup> Valery Kuzmin, the Russian Ambassador to Moldova, stated in June 2010 that Russian humanitarian aid to the region totaled \$27-29 million dollars per year for the last three years, "Transnistria must be treated as an equal partner in conflict settlement talks," <http://www.azi.md/en/story/11938> Accessed September 20, 2011. It is unclear

earmarked for “supporting Transnistrian industry, its national currency, and the solvency of its state pension fund.”<sup>247</sup> The tendency for outsiders to see Russia as directly controlling Transnistria is false, if only because the authorities have had nearly two decades to consolidate their rule and position themselves as the sole conduit for Russian aid. The PMR state remains the sole (re)distributor of internal and external wealth. This distribution operates within material (pensions supplements, government benefits) and symbolic (recognition of residents’ difficult subject positions) registers. Whether it is a few dollars a month in discounts, hundreds of thousand dollars in tax credits, or cheap gas that you never use because you do not own a car, *everybody* gets something.

### **“Washing” Money: The Middle of Nowhere as the Center of Everything**

Money is a social relation, a symbolic system, and a material reality.<sup>248</sup> Money can either be a source of national stability or of collective anxiety.<sup>249</sup> When the state fails to provide a

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what the category of humanitarian aid includes and what other types of aid (economic, military, financial) Russia gives to the region.

<sup>247</sup> “Transnistria will receive from Russia more financial assistance.” <http://politicom.moldova.org/news/transnistria-will-receive-from-russia-more-financial-assistance-200879-eng.html>

<sup>248</sup> Money can be divided into categories, each with different terms used to describe them. Tokens denote the physical representation (usually coins or bills) they serve as money. Cash is a term of accounting, the sum of tokens and other highly liquid legal claims (e.g., cash on hand for businesses); money in the bank is cash, but not a token until it is redeemed. Currency denotes all claims, potential or real, for a given class of tokens with regard to the holder; currency implies an issuer, a government, or a community that uses the currency. Money is all of the above, but in the abstract sense; to speak of money is to speak of society, of an embedded cultural context in which particular tokens circulate. Money is instituted and defined by a society; it cannot exist independently of a society that uses it. Subject to convention (law, regulation, and custom), money is a floating signifier, representing nothing in particular but rather receiving its content from its context, from the will of its users (Westbrook 2004: 41-42). Money forms no associations, and its promise to representing anything in particular is never fulfilled, as its inherent fungibility eludes any singular representation.

<sup>249</sup> Simmel (1907) wrote at length about money and modernity, about how money’s abstraction and anonymity liberated people from status distinctions and fostered egalitarianism yet paradoxically left them with only money to judge the world around them (Maurer 2006: 19). Hart (1986) posits money as relating to political entities and to markets, “two sides of the coin,” as money is a token backed by the state and a commodity set in motion by the market. The state side of the coin reflects political authority while the market side reflects the horizontal relationship inherent in market exchange (Hart 1986; Maurer 2006: 27). Through money, the state creates value through its word (and, by extension, belief in this word) and markets create value through material exchanges. The iconography and

stable monetary environment, alternative currencies proliferate, as was the case in the United States during the Great Depression. Even today, local currencies circulate alongside national ones. Yet when a currency's inherent fictionality is revealed, there can be profound economic effects and social disruptions.<sup>250</sup> Though largely insulated from international financial flows, money in Transnistria is alternately a curse or a blessing, a reminder of unfulfilled hopes or a measure of relative enrichment. The Transnistrian ruble, the only official currency circulating in this unrecognized country, alludes to the paradoxes of modern economics and the larger political background in which exchange takes place. The basic tenet of money— that its value is backed by nothing more than faith in its issuing entity – is particularly salient in place like the PMR.

The PMR's currency dates to 1993 when Soviet rubles ceased to circulate. In 1991, the region experienced an acute shortage of money that was aggravated when PMR was forced to leave the (Soviet) ruble zone. In 1993, old Soviet rubles with stamps glued on them were put into circulation.<sup>251</sup> One year later special, PMR rubles were printed in Russia and Austria. The Transnistrian ruble was initially not a currency but instead functioned as a payment coupon. Nicknamed the *suvorovka* after the famous Russian general depicted on it (all denominations of the currency bears his portrait), the currency has had a difficult time. Since its introduction, the exchange rate has plummeted; in the summer of 1995 one U.S. dollar could buy 35,000 - 40,000 Transnistrian rubles (Kolstø and Malgin 1998: 112-113). In 2000, the Transnistria ruble was redenominated from 1,000,000 to 1. Since then, it has largely maintained its stability, with its exchange rates set by the Transnistrian central bank, since the currency is not traded internationally.

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symbolism of money offers a chance to understand how money related to national identity and how its functions in larger political projects to strengthen national sentiment and solidarity (the most modern example being the Euro).

<sup>250</sup> Witness the price of gold, which from 2000 until 2010 has skyrocketed from under \$300 to more than \$1200 per ounce.

The use of old Soviet rubles may at first glance seem like an *ad hoc* means of payment useful to differentiate themselves vis-à-vis Moldova. Yet like most things in Transnistria, the story is more complicated and lends credence to the maxim that the middle of nowhere is the center of everything.<sup>252</sup> Caches of old Soviet rubles and the lure of illicit convertibility converge in a tale of how the Soviet 14<sup>th</sup> army, based in Tiraspol, temporarily turned Transnistria into a money laundering operation on an unprecedented scale. Much of what follows is based upon recollections from residents and from the memoirs of military officials with direct knowledge of it. For a brief period during the summer of 1993, in the immediate aftermath of armed conflict with Moldova, the military field bank of the 14<sup>th</sup> Soviet Army became a sinkhole for old Soviet rubles, a place where trains full of worthless money were exchanged for newly minted Russian rubles and later United States dollars. Russian leaders in Moscow decided to use the bank to exchange the old Soviet money that, according to officials, had not already been exchanged. This order came from none other than Yeltsin's defense minister, Pavel Grachev.<sup>253</sup> At that time, the exchange of Soviet rubles for new currencies had ceased in all of the former Soviet republics except for war-torn Tajikistan, the last country to leave the ruble zone in 1995. In the summer of 1993, billions of old Soviet rubles ceased to be stores of value and were worth less than the paper they were printed on. The military field bank was ostensibly to be used for the financial needs of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army (salaries, purchasing food, equipment, fuel, etc.), yet this order from the Ministry of Defense allowed the bank to convert old Soviet rubles into Russian rubles.

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<sup>251</sup> The stamps depicted Tiraspol's founder, Alexander Suvorov.

<sup>252</sup> I borrow this expression from Jack Hitt's print and radio journalism on Nauru. See "The Billion-Dollar Shack," *The New York Times Magazine*, December 10th, 2000 and his *This American Life* piece.

<sup>253</sup> Grachev gained notoriety primarily because of his military incompetence and longstanding allegations of corruption. In the PMR, he was alleged to be involved in a scheme that used the military-field bank of the 14th Army to exchange then-worthless Soviet rubles for Russian rubles. During fieldwork, informants described suitcases, automobiles, and trains full of old Soviet rubles that were converted. Allegedly, Alexander Lebed and Mikhail Bergman (the former commander of the Tiraspol garrison of the 14th Army) tried to halt this illicit scheme but were personally rebuked by Grachev.

One lifelong resident of Tiraspol told me of how he personally witnessed caravans of trucks and trains carrying Soviet currency into the region from Russia and far flung parts of the former Soviet Union.<sup>254</sup> Then (and now) the region was legally part of the Republic in Moldova, located hundreds of kilometers from the Russian Federation. This exchange scheme is but one of the many machinations [*makhanatsia*] that occurred as the remnants of the Soviet Union were picked apart by those with one hand in the state-controlled economy and the other in the free market.

In his memoirs, Mikhail Bergman (former commander of the Tiraspol garrison of the 14<sup>th</sup> Army) portrays Alexander Lebed (then commander of the 14th Army and later a Russian presidential candidate and governor) as trying to disrupt these exchanges. Ultimately, Lebed was unsuccessful in the face of pressure from Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, President Yeltsin, and PMR authorities. Informants told me that this illicit exchange was not limited to Kremlin insiders. It was common knowledge that businesses from Transnistria, Moldova, and other Soviet republics exchanged money in the region. The opportunity was not lost on individuals, who arrived in droves to exchange their old Soviet rubles. One elderly resident, speaking about the introduction of new money in Transnistria, described how the locals were powerless in the face of a monetary flood of unprecedented proportions.

Russia did their own money, we ordered money in Moscow for Transnistria, Sergei Dubinin [at the time Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Committee on Economic Cooperation with CIS States] wouldn't give out this money that was already paid for. What could we do? At that time, old Soviet money from all republics went into the garbage. Nobody needed it. Somehow, suddenly, people knew that in Transnistria they still used the old Soviet money. People came from all the countries of the former USSR in cars filled with the old money, with bags of money. They bought everything that they could find in stores. You understand, even the wooden handles of shovels didn't remain. Nothing – empty shelves. How could we live? Then they [Transnistrian authorities] quickly printed these little stamps (with Suvorov); they started to call this money *suvorovki* [after Alexander Suvorov, the Russian general and founder of Tiraspol]. Each

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<sup>254</sup> In all likelihood these Soviet rubles had already been exchanged.

stamp had a number 1,000, 10,000, 15,000, 50,000, 100,000 ... devaluation was terrible, catastrophic. At the beginning, when these stamps came, what did they do? Each worker was given a checkbook, attested for by the bookkeeper and factory director. [When you wanted to buy something,] you would go to the store and have them deduct the amount from your checkbook. Previously, you could buy a car with these check books. To go to the store and use it to buy half a kilo of sausage! It was savagery. Huge lines ... we all lived through this ... Later there was an understanding with Russia .... It [money] would come through military field bank of the 14<sup>th</sup> army. Lebed was the commander. Lebed closed this, and they [Transnistrian authorities] remained without anything. Lebed was a populist.

Far from existing as an exchange bureau for Soviet rubles of dubious provenance, the military field bank was the legitimate channel for receiving money from Moscow, money that was, in his words, bought and paid for. In his narrative, the PMR state is blameless, as it is individuals (Dubinin, Lebed) that hindered the calm transition. During the time of this exchange, one informant told me, everything had its price. And when money could literally be conjured from trash, it was hard to refuse a good deal — everything was for sale. Military officers sold the equipment and supplies of the 14th Army at cut-rate prices, from cars, fuel, equipment, and even apartments designated for servicemen and their families. The spoils of the Soviet state were natural resources to be extracted by those who knew how to navigate the terrain between the institutions of a then non-existent socialist state and the emerging capitalist market.

Despite this all, international recognition remains the orienting frame of the Transnistrian subject. Remarking on the sudden disappearance of state socialism, one informant condensed the myriad of economic problems in the region in terms of the issue of recognition.

Before the fall of the USSR we had a socialist system. There was socialism. We got used to that system, we were born under it, and we lived our whole lives under it. And suddenly socialism collapsed. It began in the center, and then it collapsed everywhere. Well, how to survive? It is easier for those countries that are recognized to survive. Ours isn't recognized. A factory, if it works, it produces products. Products can't simply go into storage, products should be exported, sent to those who ordered them. There should be imports and exports, but to do that you need to conclude contracts with somebody. But the world says that we can only conclude contracts with countries that are recognized, we



are an unrecognized state. If you can't fulfill your obligations, they you can't obtain economic liability ... we are unrecognized.

He concluded this exchange by talking about the need to create private enterprises that would then be able to conclude contracts in the context of capitalist exchange. In his mind, recognition would confer convertibility upon the PMR's economy and enable it to prosper by engaging with other recognized countries on equal terms. As one reads this, however, one is struck by how outdated notions of production, contracts, and business practices are overshadowed by recognition. He speaks as if global economic competition would vanish once recognition is secured. When required, blame can be placed on individuals or on collective entities, but blame is never found within. In this dichotomous worldview, the larger context of plunder and manipulation is never connected with locals. The last critical step – connecting the dots – is never taken, as the evidence might lead back to a founding untruth. Liminality-at-large once again rears its ugly head.

The dichotomous worldview of us versus them constitutes a scalable logic that easily can be applied to other realms. During my time in the region, the details of embezzlement and corruption were known right down to the persons involved and the amount of money. Such intimate details functioned not as revelations to be shouted from the rooftops, but as the basis for local knowledge. These revelations hark back to the writings of Canetti, who argued that secrecy lies at the heart of power. Taussig expands upon Canetti's dictum through his notion of the public secret, "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated" (1999: 5). The circulation of the public secret creates social subjects who know what not to know, who understand the details but are unable to articulate them publicly. It is not that people are unable, but that there is no sense in articulating these details, since nothing will change and most want to avoid trouble for themselves and their families. On numerous occasions I was reminded, in

response to some question, of the Russian proverb, “the less you know, the better you sleep.”

The region’s hyper-marginality and uncertain legal basis only contributes to the intrigue and paranoia residents speak of when describing the current state of affairs.<sup>255</sup>

### **Economic Flows and Informational Architecture**

Perhaps more than anything, what stands out when viewing the aforementioned economic issues is how each has been refined and shaped by regional particularities. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Soviet development had given the region a rich industrial base that played an outsized role in the economy of the MSSR. This economic differentiation became the basis for political disengagement. This subsequent political separation afforded the PMR the largess of the Russian Federation, a sponsor with geopolitical and economic interests in the region. Russian subsidies insulate the region from the demands of market discipline and provide pensioners with just enough benefits to see no incentive to change. Within the PMR, state institutions and bureaucrats have staked fiefdoms in which significant economic rents can be generated.

Sheriff’s connections with PMR authorities are not disputed, though its opacity vis-à-vis the state positions it beyond criticism, for it functions as a provider where the state falters. Two decades of separation have created a readily available inventory of systemic differences between the PMR and Moldova; the PMR’s initial hopes and goals of economic prosperity and independence now anchor a politicized reality that lacks any significant productive base — it is purely rhetorical and performative. On more than one occasion President Igor Smirnov has declared that the PMR has all of the preconditions to become a “small Switzerland.” Such

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<sup>255</sup> Undoubtedly there are other schemes for making money in Transnistria (some of which I deal with elsewhere), though my research was limited by my position as a foreign interlocutor limited the lines of questioning I could realistically pursue.

proclamations contain the required keywords of prosperity that overlook the very real economic predation and decay in the region.

Though Russia reliably supports the PMR, its support is not unconditional. The region's most valuable assets remain in Russian hands. Perhaps sensing the need for change, Russia no longer unconditionally supports President Smirnov. Until a few months ago, pensioners received additional Russian “humanitarian aid” each month in the form of pension supplements of \$15 a month. Russia recently suspended its aid payments until their distribution methods could be refined and an independent audit conducted. Meanwhile, the former President Igor Smirnov was forced to pay the supplements with natural gas utility fees. These receipts have traditionally been used for discretionary spending — the money previously was deposited in a bank connected to the president’s son, now since the resumption of Russian aid in 2012 they have been directly transferred to the new President Yevgheny Shevchuk.

Virilio famously declared that information is architecture by other means (2007). In the PMR information becomes a means of social control, a way to create the appearance of order. In Transnistria, secrecy, rumor, intrigue, and the selective narration of events give the population a vocabulary with which to apprehend their present situation, seen to be the result of “double standards” by the West. For those who lived through the late Soviet period, the 1992 conflict with Moldova, or have simply experienced PMR statehood, the state is not the entity that profits from business, but the legitimate successor to the Soviet Union. The chaos of the 1990s and the present state of affairs preclude blame for local leaders. This narrative forecloses culpability: nationalists caused the Soviet Union to disintegrate. Moldova tried to take over our land and our factories, but we fought back and won. After more than two decades, residents find a degree of

comfort in being cast as outlaws and bandits.<sup>256</sup> In the words of one resident, the primary success of the PMR has been to turn the region into a “swamp” in which people, ideas, and initiatives are not thwarted outright but left to sink on their own. Just as any attempt to build a business is likely to end in disappointment if it catches the eye of someone with more connections or Sheriff, any attempt to analyze the situation critically will only lead to disappointment when faced with a system that ceaselessly realizes its profit at the people’s expense.

## Conclusion

I now want to return to the question of the people as biomass, [*biomassa*]. How does a population become *biomassa*? The quote itself comes from the former director of the Transnistrian Central Bank. Though unattributed, it presciently summarizes the physical and material situation of residents. The people, an undifferentiated mass of individuals who spend, constitute passive consumers, individuals who earn a meager salary or subsist on a miserable pension. Due to its near-monopoly, Sheriff successfully captures the majority of the region’s economic transactions. Money not captured by Sheriff goes to pay utility bills and rent, funds gathered by the authorities to pay for Russian gas that finances the government. When this quote came up in conversations, reactions to the notion of the population as *biomassa* ranged from tirades of curse words to nods and affirmations. Rooted to the region by familial bonds and proud of this once-productive place, this *biomassa* is not infinitely renewable. Fifteen years ago the region’s population was nearly 750,000; official statistics today put the number 520,000, but in reality it is probably closer to 370,000, with nearly 150,000 pensioners (Fedorov 2009). When

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<sup>256</sup> Soon Transnistria’s outlaws and bandits will come to the big screen. In October 2011 shooting wrapped on a film adaptation of a largely false criminal memoir written by a Transnistrian living in Italy, Nicolai Lilin. For more discussion of the book, *Siberian Education*, see Bobick 2011: 249-252.

people cease to be useful politically, they are not deprived of citizenship or expelled from the community, but abandoned to a slow death (Berlant 2007).

One recent article in a local opposition newspaper, “Genocide – Transnistria?” was written by Ivan Mikhailovich Fedorov, a ninety-four year old veteran of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>257</sup> The article talks about the man who brought peace to Transnistria, General Lebed, who proclaimed in 1992 that Moldova was conducting “genocide against its own people.” This genocide, a “monster with many heads,” continues unabated through poverty, hopelessness, alcoholism, drugs, and a lack of spirituality. Transnistria, Fedorov writes, is “probably the only state in the world whose government looks at the death of its own people with absolute indifference.” According to the author, the main weapon to combat this genocide is the love of one’s land, the place where they were born and raised. Yet this weapon is also a curse. Having failed to build a “little Switzerland,” residents can live in ignorance or to accept their place in the system. Residents object to being seen as ignorant about the affairs of their country, but discerning the truth from the fictions propagated by the state is asking too much of the generative appendages of the state machine. Acknowledging complicity would implicate the self in the process.

Having experienced the demise of a superpower, the audacious hopes of a young state, and the collapse of its ideals, residents are left with frustration, apathy, and cynicism. In the face of proclamations that posit Transnistria as heaven on earth, the disjuncture between the mediated world and the real world becomes too much to bear. The text of Ivan Mikhailovich’s article bears this out. Having no strength left to question or to object, he can only recall the chilling anecdote: “if you are raped, try to relax and have fun.” Though cruel, for this veteran of the Great Patriotic

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<sup>257</sup> “Genocide – Transnistria?” Геноцид по – приднестровски? In *Man and His Rights*, Человек и его права. No. 37(84). <http://dnestnews.info/n37-84/597-genocid-po-pridnestrovski.html> Accessed November 8, 2010.

War this expression appropriately captures the very real situation of people living without protections. Not abandoned by sovereign power nor merely the holders of sovereignty, in a literal sense the people are sovereign power insofar as they perform it yet also constitute the static force that generates the material means of statehood.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> For more on the body and sovereignty, see Agamben 1998, 1999. These topics are addressed in both the introduction in the section “Sovereignty and Anthropology” as well as in “Biology and the Nation.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CHE GUEVARA IN TIRASPOL: GEOPOLITICS, KNOWLEDGE, AND SPECTACLE

*Hanging above the counter was a black tee shirt with a portrait of Che Guevara and the inscription: 'Rage Against the Machine'. On the piece of cardboard under the tee shirt it said: 'Bestseller of the month!' There was nothing surprising about that – Tatarsky knew very well (he had even written about it in one of his concepts) that in the area of radical youth culture nothing sells as well as well-packaged and politically correct rebellion against a world that is ruled by political correctness and in which everything is packaged to be sold.*

Victor Pelevin, *Generation P*

*The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.*

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

*Everywhere there are postmodernists – they haunt us.*

Dmitri Soin

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wars are not fought solely on the battlefield. The battle for public opinion — the information war — constitutes a front whose importance is acknowledged yet which is an unlikely candidate for ethnographic research. This chapter investigates a single organization, Proryv,<sup>259</sup> located in Tiraspol. Proryv is a Che-themed political movement that emerged in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in 2005. As a project that began as a youth social movement and later became a political party, Proryv offers a unique perspective on PMR social issues, political practice, and knowledge production (Boyer 2005). Proryv conducts various activities (sports, charity, education, politics, leadership) and seeks to instill patriotism

and reciprocity in the young generation of Transnistrians. Proryv, like other political parties, seeks to build up a constituency by increasing its “brand” through marketing techniques, *agitprop*,<sup>260</sup> and public relations. Proryv’s own activists and leaders use of this distinctly modern marketing vocabulary (brand, market segment) alongside a distinctly Soviet political lexicon. As an explicitly postmodern project (more on this below), Proryv sheds light on the social life of philosophical knowledge and spectacle in the former Soviet Union.

Competitive elections created a new system of information brokers and consultants (political technologists) whose primary job was to manipulate political processes while maintaining the appearances of democracy.<sup>261</sup> Political technologists serve simultaneously as the meta-programmers, system designers, and decision-makers of the formal aspects of politics (elections, campaigns, parties, etc.) (Wilson 2005). Astutely aware of the power of old and new technologies, political technologists have created a system of virtual objects and institutions such as political parties, think tanks, and civil society organizations that mimic their democratic equivalents. A focus on the underlying terms and knowledge used by the practitioners of virtual politics allows one to revisit social theory and academic discourse through ethnography. While it is one thing for an academic with a steady diet of social theory to deny that there are any fixed meanings, it is another to see such thinking in action in the capital of an unrecognized separatist state.

In the context of the PMR’s non-recognition, it is useful to look at its unique symbolic and representational processes. The PMR, like much of the world, has experienced a shift

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<sup>259</sup> The organization’s preferred self-appellation is either the shortened “Proryv!” or the somewhat length People’s Democartic Party - International Youth Corporation “Proryv!” Typically it is abbreviated in Russian as НДИП-ММК “Прорыв!”

<sup>260</sup> They use the Russian term for this, *agitprop*, which is short for agitation and propaganda. The term originated in the Soviet Union as a shortened form of the Department for Agitation and Propaganda, *otdel agitatsii i propaganda*.

<sup>261</sup> This is true even in the West, where the spin doctor is a long-accepted part of American politics.



whereby its political economy shifted from the production of actual goods and commodities to a symbolic economy in which images dominate. It is a place which, to paraphrase Guy Debord, there has been a marked shift from *having* to *appearing* (Debord 1994). The vibrant social, cultural, and economic life of the Soviet period existed, while today the PMR exists largely because of its ability to maintain the facade of a state. Similarly, Baudrillard (1994) addresses the shift from a modern society organized around the production and consumption to a postmodern one organized around simulation and the play of images and signs. In the latter, codes, models, and signs constitute a social order in which simulation rules.<sup>262</sup> In this context, identities are constructed through the appropriation of images, which become enmeshed within codes and models that influence how individuals perceive themselves and their relations to others. This logic of simulation permeates economics, politics, social life, and culture. Ultimately, simulation determines the contours of reality: how goods are consumed, how politics occurs, how culture is produced, and ultimately how everyday life is lived.

### **Introducing Proryv**

Proryv's headquarters are hard to miss. Situated on the central street in Tiraspol, the looming statue of Alexander Suvorov on horseback glances obliquely at its office. Proryv's glass façade features two large (two-meter high) portraits of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin, both of which are framed by the iconic black headshot of Che Guevara. The portraits appear abnormally stylized in a city marked by its otherwise bland Soviet architecture, not unlike the

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<sup>262</sup> In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard writes: "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make someone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produced in himself some of the symptoms" (Littre). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the

mirrored shopping centers that periodically punctuated the Soviet-era buildings common in provincial cities across the former Soviet Union. Next to each poster is an endorsement for these twin pillars of Russian politics: “Putin’s Proryv,” “Proryv is for Dmitry Medvedev.” The Russian tricolor and the flag of the PMR frame the commentary itself.

The Russian word *proryv* translates into English as “breakthrough.” The organization is modeled on pro-Western organizations such as Otpor (Serbia), Kmara (Georgia), and those active in the Ukraine during the Orange Revolution. Proryv was founded in June 2005 as a youth corporation and became a political party in 2006.<sup>263</sup> According to their website, Proryv was founded by a group of sociology students who initially organized a series of actions in support of democracy and human rights. After these actions, students turned to their sociology professor, Dmitri Soin, Proryv’s erstwhile leader and ideologue, to “show them the way” to political and social self-development. In their own words, these actions instilled a sense of camaraderie and awakened a desire for political engagement.<sup>264</sup>

In 2005, “colored revolutions” and an economic blockade by the Republic of Moldova threatened Transnistria.<sup>265</sup> Proryv’s metamorphosis from a group of sociology students to a well-funded social movement is directly related to these threats. Street-level pickets, marches, and flash mobs constitute Proryv’s *agitprop* repertoire. Tireless self-promoters, their website describes their earliest actions as resonating far beyond the PMR: “the actions reverberated on

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“imaginary.” Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces “true” symptoms? Objectively one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill.” (Baudrillard 1994: 3).

<sup>263</sup> The office name of Proryv is the International Youth Corporation Proryv, and they later added the qualifier People’s Democratic Party after forming their political party in 2006. It is unclear whether the corporation is merely an umbrella label or whether the organization actually functions like a corporation, with shared, a corporate board, etc. Aside from newspapers, small publications, internet advertising on their websites, and short courses, Proryv had few means of generating cash that would lead one to believe that it was a corporation.

<sup>264</sup> Transnistrian “Proryv!” Official site. <http://proriv.wordpress.com/> Accessed August 8, 2010. All quotes for this section come from the organizations website. All translations are my own.

<sup>265</sup> Proryv’s website lists the threat of colored revolutions, the subsequent economic blockade, and the referendum of 2006 as formative events that required their assistance.

the walls of international organizations, on the border with Moldova and Ukraine, and in international youth forums and conferences.”<sup>266</sup> Proryv actions have three primary goals: (1) to preserve the Russian presence in the PMR; (2) to defend the rights of Transnistrians and to affirm their right to statehood; and (3) to oppose “the double standards of the international community.” These points contain the core tenets of the PMR’s unrecognized existence: maintaining Russian support, performing and affirming PMR sovereignty, and articulating a critique of international sovereignty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The People’s Democratic Party “Proryv” was founded in response to calls for Proryv to “come to power” that came in the form of increasingly loud demands that they assume a formal political mandate.<sup>267</sup> The organization views this as noteworthy: “The uniqueness of the situation lies in the fact that no adult party has created a youth movement and the youth movement grew into a political party.”<sup>268</sup> Though this situation has been repeated in both Western and Eastern Europe, it is a first for the PMR.

Like most founding myths, this one tends to obscure more than it reveals. This official history effaces the Kremlin connections that initially financed the organization. Much intrigue remains centered on a single individual, Modest Kolerov. In 2005, Kolerov was appointed by President Putin to head a newly created “Department for Interregional and Cultural Relations.” This department sought to create a more direct means of influencing the affairs of countries in the former Soviet Union with Russian citizens and significant Russian-speaking populations. It was during Kolerov’s push to justify public expenditures in Russia’s “near abroad” that pro-

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<sup>266</sup> The website lists additional informational resources that Proryv’s founders spontaneously created, including internet sites, newspapers, and “cooperation with television and radio.” These informational resources eventually became *Lenta PMR* (<http://www.tiras.ru>).

<sup>267</sup> The stated constituents of the party include the intelligentsia, small and medium business owners, workers, civil servants, and veterans.

<sup>268</sup> Transnistrian “Proryv!” Official site. <http://proriv.wordpress.com/> Accessed August 8, 2010.

Russian social movements like Proryv found their startup capital.<sup>269</sup> A quote from Kolerov in *Kommersant*<sup>270</sup> makes clear his views on Russia and its neighbors: “Russia must stand up for its interest in the post-Soviet territory.” His weapons, he stressed, would not showcase Russian “hard power,” but would instead be “culture and spirituality.”<sup>271</sup>

Reacting to the success of the Orange Revolution and the threat posed by western-backed social movements, the Kremlin sought to usurp the energy of social movements by cloning them. These Kremlin-backed projects utilized the form of these social movements – youth-driven, street-level activism, catchy branding – but supplied their own content in the form of a discourse that posited Russian-speaking regions as threatened enclaves requiring moral and material support to resist NATO and the West.<sup>272</sup> While Proryv mimics the organizations that played a key role in “colored revolutions,” it supports the status quo and its platform is hardly revolutionary.

Proryv organizes a range of activities in Transnistria. They were the first organization to popularize Russian holidays in the region, adding to the widespread belief that the PMR is in fact part of the Russian Federation.<sup>273</sup> Proryv vigorously promoted the 2006 referendum in the region that affirmed the PMR’s independence.<sup>274</sup> The organization’s social and humanitarian programs

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<sup>269</sup> In response to a question about funding, Soin told me that Proryv has not received one cent from the PMR government. Proryv is self-financing, obtaining 50% of its operating budget from the sale of newspapers, flags, Che Guevara notebooks, and other things. The other 50% comes from unnamed “Friends of Proryv.” Due to Soin’s former position in state security (*MGB*), Proryv is often referred to by residents as a state-security project.

<sup>270</sup> *Kommersant* is owned by Alisher Usmanov, an oligarch with Kremlin ties and significant assets in the PMR, including the MMZ steel plant in Rîbnița, the single largest contributor to the PMR’s official budget.

<sup>271</sup> “Putin Appoints Velvet Counterrevolutionary,” *Kommersant*, March 23, 2005.

<sup>272</sup> The off-the-record story about Proryv’s financing is as follows: the Tiraspol-based Proryv (the origin of the Proryv brand) received a substantial sum of money (rumored to be a few million dollars), which was supposed to be divided up between the various international Proryv fronts (i.e., in the Crimea, Abkhazia, etc.). The initial funds were never divided up, and they proved to be critical to Proryv, which now boasts its own printing press, newspaper, web portal, and leadership school, among other things.

<sup>273</sup> Russia Day, Day of the Russian Flag, Day of the Russian Constitution, and the St. George ribbon campaign

<sup>274</sup> For more on the 2006 referendum and other referendums in the PMR, see chapter two, “Creating a People: Referendums, Nostalgia, and Subjectivity”

include assistance to veterans, orphans, and the disabled, as well as an array of activities that seek to develop patriotism and political activism among youth and young adults.

Proryv positions themselves as battling an entrenched elite despite established connections between its leadership and PMR state security. Despite supporting independence and recognition, they position themselves as an opposition force and claim to be blacklisted from local media. Since January 2008, Proryv's radio broadcasts have been forbidden by the Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, which sought to blunt the "growing prestige and popularity of the movement."<sup>275</sup> With the airwaves closed, Proryv raised their profile through marches, pickets, and flash mobs.

Proryv's headquarters also house the "Che Guevara High School of Political Leadership." The school was founded in 2005 to prepare party cadres and encourage youth participation in politics. Named in honor of the Marxist revolutionary, aside from its logo and a few black and white photographs, there is no other connection with Che or revolutionary politics. The school's course offerings concentrate on political technology<sup>276</sup> and practical skills such as marketing and website construction. Recent offerings include courses on "Political marketing, political technology, political advertising and election campaigns;" "Computer technology;" "Website building;" "Information marketing;" and a vague course called "Psychological Success."<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Transnistrian "Proryv!" Official site. <http://proriv.wordpress.com/> Accessed August 8, 2010.

<sup>276</sup> Political technology includes any and all efforts made to organize electoral success through subterfuge. A whole industry of political technologists and PR specialists has emerged in the post-Soviet space in response to the demands of competitive elections. Part spin doctor, part propagandist, the political technologist uses any and all means at their disposal to achieve the results ordered by their client. Perhaps the most glaring success of political technology is the transformation of Vladimir Putin from an unknown state security officer to the steely-eyed, straightforward face of Russia. One anonymous Russia political technologist wrote in a guest column describe political technology as existing in a place where law does not apply and the imagination serves as a break on reality. "Political technology diverges from political science in the same way that science fiction differs from ordinary fiction. Anything is possible in a land without rule of law; the only constraint is the imagination, and political technologists certainly don't lack for imagination." A Russian "Political Technologist" Weighs in on the Arrest of Khodkorkovsky's Lawyers [http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2007/02/a\\_russian\\_political\\_technologi.htm](http://www.robertamsterdam.com/2007/02/a_russian_political_technologi.htm) Accessed August 5, 2010.

<sup>277</sup> Courses generally run for two weeks and cost 200 PMR rubles (around \$20 at the current exchange rate).

Instruction remains more focused on image-crafting and political technology than on the actual training of leaders. Graduates of the school include activists from Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Georgia, though the majority is drawn from the PMR. Inside the school, desks are arranged much like a classroom in front of a podium ringed with the flags of Proryv, Russia, and the PMR. The executive offices in the back are enclosed in glass. When filled with people, it feels like a clubhouse or a bustling meeting place.

Proryv has a practical structure that demands participation: youth come for the social activities and gradually engage in more explicitly political activities like rallies, protests, vigil, or roundtables. In their activism, Proryv seeks to connect international events with local concerns through their unique brand of youth activism.<sup>278</sup> A typical Proryv action might consist of a handful of activists marching with banners and a loudspeaker, or a solemn candlelight vigil to commemorate an important date. Reactions to Proryv actions ranged from apathy to incredulity as to whether they were to be taken seriously. Most events are filmed and posted online. As a participant-observer in many of these events, I found myself returning to the question of sincerity: what *did* Proryv want? Did they truly want to reform the PMR, to *distract* attention from other pressing issues, or were they simply another shade in the democratic palette of the PMR?

Political practice in the PMR is oriented around appearances and image-driven. These can be actual or potential images of prosperity, of the bodies of those killed during the “undeclared war” with Moldova, or of a thriving democracy with more than ten political parties. Regular informants stressed that despite the appearances of democracy, local political formations were subject to strict control by authorities who feared anything not under their direct control.

The vertical power structure of the PMR left no room for unauthorized formations. This was also case with the media and civil society. The state-controlled media provided a strong base upon which to construct a coherent, unified political edifice. Those media not under the controls of the state remained ineffective (e.g., trade union or opposition newspapers with low circulation) or were controlled by powerful economic interests (Sheriff's media companies remain the only alternative to state-controlled media, most notably in the realm of television).

### **Dmitri Soin: The Man, the Myth, and the Legend**

Proryv is known locally because of its founder and leader. Sensational rumors, innuendo, and gossip surround Proryv and its founder, Dmitri Soin. Proryv's earliest actions were meant to shock by creating a spectacle. Dmitri Soin's past and present jobs included stints as a sociology professor at Transnistrian State University, a lieutenant colonel in Transnistria's feared state security service (where he headed the department of ideological affairs and the protection of the constitution), author, political consultant, businessman, political technologist, market researcher, sworn enemy of the Moldovan state, and, it is alleged, arms trafficker and accused murderer (Soin is currently an Interpol wanted criminal).<sup>279</sup> In December 2010, he was elected to a five-year term in the Transnistrian Supreme Soviet, the highest legislative body in the PMR. When I first met him in October 2008, on the business card he handed to me his title was simply "leader."

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<sup>278</sup> Recent marches have included titles such as "Peace in Palestine, Gas in Transnistria," "Bureaucracy No, Youth – Yes," and anniversary commemorating the 20th anniversary of the PMR, the 4th anniversary of the 2006 referendum, and other political events.

<sup>279</sup> Dmitri Soin is wanted by Interpol for "crimes against life and health." Other titles include member of the Russian Association of Political Sciences, candidate of sciences in sociology (equivalent to the Ph.D. degree), and director of the Transnistrian branch of the Council for National Strategy of Russia, among others.

I first obtained an interview through the head of Proryv's youth wing. Initially she appeared hesitant when I first requested an interview; I insisted she call him and mention my academic interest in the region and to explain to him that I needed to access to the body [*dostup k telu*]. This phrase literally means "access the body" and implies having access to a politician or powerful official who solves problem.<sup>280</sup> Usually, one must pay to "access the body" and the favors it is capable of granting. Soin proved to be a key informant, later helping me obtain permanent registration in the region. Friends speculated that he unofficially served as a protection "roof," *krysha*, during the course of research.<sup>281</sup> We typically met in his club, located on the top floor of the Hotel *Aist*, an aging Soviet-style hotel dominating the embankment. The club, *Sedmoe Nebo*, Seventh Heaven, houses, in addition to the yoga club, his offices and the office of their newspaper and its website.<sup>282</sup> Operationally, *Sedmoe Nebo* was the nerve center while the Che Guevara School was the public face of Proryv.

The fact that Tiraspol had its own university was a point of pride in the region. Until 2006, Soin served as vice chair of the sociology department at Transnistrian State University (PGU) where he taught political sociology, conflict sociology, international relations, sociology of religion, and market research.<sup>283</sup> He defended his *kandidat*<sup>284</sup> at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences. When he retired from state security in 2006 he resigned his university position "to work in business." On numerous occasions Soin bragged of his work as a

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<sup>280</sup> Typically meetings and payments are arranged in code. In Moscow, a meeting with the Putin is rumored to cost "two cakes with cream." One cake equals a million dollars, and if a request indicates cream that means that the money must be transferred abroad before the meeting can take place.

<sup>281</sup> In the post-Soviet period, the term *krysha* denotes an individual or group acting as a protector of an individual or business.

<sup>282</sup> Despite being called a "club," it is more accurate to describe it as a fitness club that served tea and coffee to its clientele.

<sup>283</sup> In addition to a fruitful recruiting base, informants told me that Soin's work in the university extended beyond the classroom. In the words of one key interlocutor who had recently graduated from the university, "Soin turned the university into a swamp." Initiatives died slowly, and any sort of activism was impossible.



political consultant on campaigns at the regional and national level in Russia and about his sociological research institute. His experiences in state security, politics, and the academy inform his methods and projects. Whether speaking about business or politics, Soin remained attuned to information and the power it held. He was constantly intervening in an informational field that, in his words, operated according to changing rules in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As both practitioner and scholar, he was reflexively aware of his own position within a social field encompassing the realms of state security, the academy, politics, and civil society. For him, the link between these fields was practical insofar as he measured power by connections and their ability to marshal resources, be they crowds, cash, or information.

## **Postmodern Politics**

A performative, self-referential logic was central to Proryv. The idea of creating and serving a demand is central to understanding Proryv's role in the PMR. As a movement that tends toward visible, if questionably effective, street actions, one must remain attuned to the content of actions and their stated purpose as well as to their role at the systemic level. With this in mind, I begin by describing some vignettes that emerged over the course of participant observation before moving on to some ethnographic description.

Despite being the leader of a Che-themed social movement, Soin professed little interest in Che as a historical figure: "people think I sit up here smoking cigars all day ... I chose Che Guevara for one simple reason: kids think he is cool. Anywhere you go, Che is a cool guy. He smokes cigars, has a beard, rides motorcycles, and is a revolutionary."<sup>285</sup> Che is a resonant image

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<sup>284</sup> Roughly equivalent to the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree. It is the first post-graduate degree in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. It is followed by the *Doktor Nauk* (Doctor of Sciences) degree.

<sup>285</sup> Quote by Dmitri Soin in "Article Youth Cults in Non-Existent Countries," *Vice Magazine*.  
<http://www.vice.com/read/youth-cults-in-nonexistent-countries> Accessed October 12, 2011.

in the otherwise bland world of the PMR political marketplace. Just as Che's image adorns t-shirts, hats, and the cover of Russian postmodern fiction, the iconic image of Che superimposed on a vibrant yellow background nods to the effective use of colors and marketing in the Orange Revolution.<sup>286</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, every revolution needs both a color and a logo. "As a marketer, I do not act from the fact of what does or does not appeal to me; I proceed from the fact of what is needed. I am absolutely not interested in what I like or do not like."<sup>287</sup> What better way to engage youth than by utilizing an established pop culture icon? Despite this conscientious effort at branding, Proryv retained the feel of a back room political project insofar as spontaneity and creativity were lacking. The fact that its ranks were drawn from teenagers did little to dispel this contrived feeling.

My conversations with Dmitri Soin could have occurred in a lecture hall or in a smoky office where election strategies might be planned, though most occurred in his office overlooking the Dniester River. The topics of our interviews ranged from the academic to the mundane. More than once the subject of postmodernism came up, which he described as "the basis of my projects ... I enter the information field, create a shiny brand, and it fixes itself in this field." Soin's projects emerge in a very real sense from the post-1989 paradigm that Fukayama (1992) deems to be the "end of history." Liberal democracy has triumphed, and the laboratory of democracy becomes another venue for experimentation. What Castells (2000) terms the *information age* marks not only the beginning of fundamental reconfigurations in the realm of production, social relations, and governance, but also of knowledge itself. There is, on the one hand, an explosion of opinions, sources, and ideas, but also a blackout in which information

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<sup>286</sup> The cover of the Russian edition of Victor Pelevin's *Generation P* features Che in his iconic beret that is adorned with a Nike symbol.

<sup>287</sup> Interview with Dmitri. Soin, November 17, 2008.

becomes a strategic resource to be shaped according to the changing imperatives of capital, states, interest groups, or individuals.

In a postmodern world, contradictions are celebrated, with self-referentiality functioning freely in the absence of a totalizing narrative.<sup>288</sup> Information forms the basis for Soin's projects, of which Proryv is the most visible. In addition to websites containing original articles and aggregated news summaries, Proryv publishes a weekly newspaper, *Russian Proryv*. Information is literally his bread and butter, as his personal businesses include a printing company that creates the material distributed by Proryv.<sup>289</sup> Printed matter plays a central role in Proryv's activities, with actions often having custom crafted materials. Usually of a very high quality, these items remain functional (notebooks, pens, pencils) so that even if recipients disregard its message and symbols, the objects remain functional and may later realize their original political purpose. Proryv balances politics with pragmatism.

This idea of an object or piece of information living beyond its initial context is central to Proryv's media holdings, which includes a network of websites that aggregate and disseminate information, often via unattributed sources, rumor, or innuendo.<sup>290</sup> Proryv's flagship site, *Lenta PMR*, exists alongside *RIA Dnestr* (Russian Information Agency Dnestr) and Consulting Mobile,<sup>291</sup> the latter two run by a Proryv associate.<sup>292</sup> Often a single story will be reposted or

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<sup>288</sup> "Postmodern sensibility does not lament the loss of narrative coherence any more than the loss of being. However, the dissolution of narrative leaves the field of legitimation to a new unifying criterion: the performativity of the knowledge-producing system whose form of capital is information." Aylesworth, Gary, "Postmodernism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/postmodernism/>

<sup>289</sup> These distributed items include calendars, pamphlets, manifestos, folders, notepads, newspapers, pens, pencils, and posters, among other things.

<sup>290</sup> This is a standard practice in Russian-language internet media, and thus should not be seen as an aberration but rather as the norm.

<sup>291</sup> Consulting Mobile offers image consulting and PR services, including political consulting, Image PR, (Informational wars, measures to neutralize unprincipled competitors), analytics and opinion polls, and other internet services and web advertising. Its URL is <http://consulting-mobile.ru/index.php> Accessed August 21, 2010.

<sup>292</sup> The links between these sites are neither hidden nor openly acknowledged. Often, articles will appear on *Lenta PMR* but will be authored by Consulting Mobile.

reprinted multiple times under different headlines to increase its audience.<sup>293</sup> Stories range from information pieces (exposes, defenses, or salvos) to traditional articles or press releases documenting regional events. This information network allows Proryv's actions to be magnified, manipulated, and disseminated quickly in both print and cyberspace. I now look to Proryv's manifesto in order to shed light on the organization's philosophical foundation.

### **The Proryv Manifesto: Postmodern Ethics for a Turbulent World**

Proryv's philosophical blueprint can be found in their manifesto (2008). The manifesto itself, a snug A7 format, can easily fit in one's hand and includes both Russian and English texts. The manifesto begins with the story of how thirteen unnamed community organizations joined together to rise up against "bureaucracy, a totalitarian regime and injustice." News of this spread across Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, and even reached the EU and the United States. Proryv's name establishes a direct relation between it and youth who seek to "breakthrough" the present situation in which violence, enslavement, and double standards prevail (2008: 3). Non-recognition plays a prominent role in the manifesto insofar as it is an extended elaboration on PMR as a state founded in accordance with the people's will "which is not recognized by the world bureaucracy only because we want to live with Russia" (3). The manifesto forcefully rejects the New World Order, American-led globalization, NATO, and other "aggressive international structures" and is a corrective to the "lies, gossip, and legends that surround the Corporation."

Proryv was founded by youth who were moved by the heroic deeds of the older generation. The actions of civil society in the 1990s – the meetings, referenda, self-defense, and the armed struggle with Moldova – are the most recent manifestation of a regional Slavic

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<sup>293</sup> This has been referred to in the blogosphere as a "circle jerk."

genealogy connecting the Kievan Rus (880-1350), Suvorov's founding of Tiraspol (1792), the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), and the conflict with Moldova (1992). As a state, the PMR is the logical culmination of this series of events. "For some it is an unrecognized republic, but for us it is Motherland that needs to be protected" (5). The current generation that grew up experiencing life only within the PMR can only realize themselves if the PMR's statehood and sovereignty are recognized.

The manifesto reverses some of the many the negative associations of the PMR as a lawless region and instead claims that Moldova requires discipline (Bobick 2011). This is an ironic shift, with *Proryv* offering a 4-D plan<sup>294</sup> for Moldova: democratization, decriminalization, denazification, and demilitarization.

The course of sovereignty and independence of Pridnestrovia – this is our course. Unity with Russia and the Ukraine is the road of life for our state. Support of all the progressive movements in the world – it is our transnational mission (2008: 7).

This vague "unity with Russia and the Ukraine" will provide the inspiration the region needs.

The PMR is never the aggressor; *Proryv* too forsakes a defensive posture: "We stand up for our rights but do not defend ourselves. Defense always leads to defeat" (2008: 9).

The Che Guevara High School of Political Leadership is described as a place where cadres emerge prepared to spread freedom around the world. "Our ideology is not just phrases, theses and calls. It is first of all fundamental modern knowledge in the fields of informational and political technologies, marketing and management, psychology and other important spheres of science that are important for successful struggle" (2008: 8). *Proryv*'s *bête noire*, the former Moldovan Vladimir Voronin, makes an appearance. Echoing the themes of chapter three, *Proryv* offers to send Voronin to the "Museum of political dead bodies" (2008: 9; Verdery 2000).

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<sup>294</sup> This is an ironic reversal of one Moldovan political analyst's (Oazu Nantoi) plan for solving the Transnistrian dispute. His 3-D plan entailed democratization, demilitarization, and decriminalization.

Symbolic violence aside, Proryv positions itself as breaking through the information blockade by creating the conditions for individual self-realization.

Much of the manifesto decries war and corporations while simultaneously voicing a host of conspiracy theories that circulate in the Russian media: that AIDS was created by the US government, the Russian cross (Russia's demographic crisis, increasing death rate and declining birth rate - addressed in chapter four), and the proliferation of drugs and alcohol from the West. The most interesting topic singled out for discussion is terrorism. Retroactively, the origins of the PMR and the Transnistrian *narod* emerge from the flames of "Moldo-Romanian terrorism" — in 1992, "terrorists acted in accordance with western plan of annihilation of east-Slavic citadel — *Pridnestrove*." (2008: 16). Sectional headings include *wars*, *terrorism*, *epidemics*, *cataclysms*, and *loneliness*. This last section places Western consumerism alongside a deterministic view of nations as repositories of genetic material.<sup>295</sup> Europeans, enslaved to capital, cannot support the national genetic fund [*genofund*] because consumer culture creates an ever-increasing dialectic of needs and wants, the ultimate message being that you should not procreate if you cannot consume.<sup>296</sup> In this childless wasteland, loneliness and moral degradation reign.<sup>297</sup> The biological basis of the nation, the *genofund*, must not be abandoned in favor of an alienating consumer culture. Above all, the PMR demands a stable biological basis for reproduction, something the manifesto see as anathema to capitalism as practiced in the West. Like the *biomassa* described in

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<sup>295</sup> Though different, the prevalence of biological metaphors of the population and nation are striking, from the population as *biomassa*, see Chapter three, "The Economics of Separatism: Fiefdoms, Subsidies, and the Virtual." For more on biological metaphors in sociology and Russian social science, see Oushakine 2007, 2010.

<sup>296</sup> This idea of the nation as a repository, a *genofund*, is remarkably similar to the *biomassa* rhetoric from the economics chapter.

<sup>297</sup> "Business industry around love to children has expanded so much that people are simply afraid to create a family. Fear that you can't buy everything that advertising proposes has become a powerful psychological weapon. Millions of people are depressed, suffer from impotence, have serious psychological deviations. Society is under pressure from the "New world order" and moves towards absolute decadence and self-destruction" (2008: 20-21).

chapter four, the term *genofund* is a return to biology when other positive models of national belonging are not applicable (cf. Oushakine 2007).

Amidst this morass of conflicting values and desires, Proryv alone holds the truth, a truth that emerges, somewhat paradoxically, through postmodernism.

In fact, “PRORIV!” is a foundry of managers and leaders of the third millennium. In the blast furnace of the Corporation, in accordance with postmodernism recipes, intellect, will, purposefulness and physical perfection merge together and give birth to a new, highest-quality harmony of the third millennium. This makes “PRORIV!” the center of attention and attraction of those who long for truth, independent of national, religious, and social status. (2008: 22).

This idea of harmony becomes a template for a future in which money will become devoid of functional value and exist only in museums. Curiously, despite its internationalist and anti-capitalist overtones, Proryv’s manifesto fails to reference the *Communist Manifesto* despite its internationalism. “We don’t divide people by nationality, race and religious indication. We divide them into those who are ready for self-perfection and those who will always stay at the level of biological existence.” (2008: 26). The manifest constructs a somewhat contradictory genealogy that includes both archaic religious texts and contemporary postmodern works.

Our sources are the ancient philosophical systems, with which we can get acquainted by reading the sacred texts. [Sic] But in comparison to orthodox conceptions, we cultivate inside ourselves a postmodernist understanding of those daily occurrences propagated to us by television, the internet, and other mass media. We are skeptical to the perspectives of the society of consumption. If mankind doesn’t overcome consumerism and parasitism, it will die. That is why the mega project “PRORIV!” is so important. Our name can be interpreted as the action directed at overcoming the existing negative state of affairs. Our way is for those who are strong of spirit. Either us or nobody. [sic] (2008: 26-27).

The message is clear enough: Proryv is an organization capable of generating new formations, ideologies, and means of self-perfection.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Its mystical, anti-consumerist message intimates that the manifesto’s unnamed author or authors are familiar with Russian postmodern fiction, particularly the writings of Victor Pelevin.

At the manifesto's conclusion, postmodern sensibility is balanced with pragmatism in the form of an ideological crib sheet. An appendix lists what Proryv is for and what they are against. Proryv is for: (1) International recognition of PMR; (2) The eternal and indestructible Union with Russia; (3) Brotherly relationship with the Ukraine, Republic of Belarus and other countries of Commonwealth of Independent States; (4) Good education and public health services of high quality; (5) Normal economics and just distribution of the results of work; (6) Building social state where human rights will be protected; and (7) a healthy way of life, harmony, peace and cooperation.

The items Proryv is against looks very much like an agenda that could appear at any anti-globalization protest. The organization is against: (1) War, double standards, blockades, famine and all kinds of violence; (2) Social injustice, division for the very rich and the very poor; (3) Ecological irresponsibility, pollution of the environment, unending exploitation of natural resources; (4) Alcoholism, drug addiction, corruption and crime; (5) Any kind of nationalism and fascism; (6) Religious fanaticism and extremism; and (7) Dictatorship, manipulation and exploitation. At its most basic level, the manifesto elaborates a political platform cum wellness plan on the basis of postmodernism, a movement that allegedly heralded, theoretically speaking, the death of the metanarrative and coherency.

The confluence of critical theory, post-Soviet irony, and the unrealized political teleology of the PMR offer an enlightening view on the social life of theory and its role in mediating a contradictory post-Soviet reality (Boyer 2001). The manifesto merges conspiratorial whisperings resonant in the post-Soviet world with a standard progressive political agenda (social justice, environmentalism, human rights, etc.) in order to create a contradictory yet resonant picture. From a marketing perspective, the manifesto contains something for everyone, from the



pensioners that participated in the strike actions that led to the region's disengagement to individuals simply seeking a healthy lifestyle to youth who simply want to be cool like Che. When faced with the reality of a fragmented post-Soviet existence that lacks an overarching national narrative, the allure of being connected to something greater should not be underestimated.<sup>299</sup> Though lacking coherency, the manifesto provides keywords and themes that offer the possibility of overcoming isolation.

### **Methods: Theory, Branding, Cloning**

Ethnographic data and its theoretical component rest upon observed phenomena. Proryv's use of a social science vocabulary (networks, systems, documents, interest groups, market segments, etc.) offers insight on knowledge production in a place where the relationship between knowledge and reality is less mediated. The Soviet Union lacked a distinct civil society to exist between the state and the people.<sup>300</sup> Post-Soviet reality remains a canvas upon which to realize ideas and introduce novelty, whether it is in the realm of politics, consumption, language, or leisure, with reality an overdetermined spectacle derived out of the effects of the message that you create, cultivate, and disseminate. The relative durability of the PMR as a polity has little to

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<sup>299</sup> Oushakine (2009: 73) describes how information offers a means of connectedness. "Post-Soviet narratives, brought to life by market irrationality, stemmed from a dual desire to register profound disagreement with the dominant view of Russia's development and, at the same time, to offer a new cosmology of connectedness, a new form of totality that could effectively replace fragmented or dysfunctional cultural frameworks of the previous period. Political control of the Soviet regime and consumerist illusions of the market society were replaced by the fantasy of a large-scale presence in convoluted networks of relations. The fear of individual isolation attributed to capital was overcome by a vision of polymorphous embeddedness in the constant flow of information."

<sup>300</sup> One can put forth the argument, as Buck-Morss (2000: 29) does, that the Soviet Union was the first modern state to be under civil society's control. The proclaimed goal of communism was the withering away of the state, its substitution by mass-democratic participation, — "communism" as the rule by all of civil society.

do with good governance; it is the result of imposing order upon an unruly informational and ideological terrain<sup>301</sup>.

Public relations (PR) are central to Proryv's activism.<sup>302</sup> Every action I witnessed had at least one dedicated cameraman for documentary purposes. Visually chronicling events allowed the organization to extend events beyond the immediate context and to create consumable informational products (video clips, press releases, photo montages). Building its brand often entailed controversy. Proryv's early actions included stealing the flag of the OSCE mission in Tiraspol and replacing it with their own, sending model boats with burning Moldovan flags across the Dniester River, burning an effigy of Moldovan president Vladimir Voronin dressed as a Nazi, and barricading numerous pro-Western NGOs. These actions were meant to get people talking. Soin was unabashedly proud of how these actions achieved in a short time what it usually takes years to do – to increase brand awareness. Getting people talking was the first step, and the second step entailed polishing the group's image.<sup>303</sup>

As a political party Proryv bases its hopes for electoral success on the strength of its pro-Russian orientation. Proryv mimics *United Russia* insofar as it too seeks to build a brand that intuitively appeals to voters.<sup>304</sup> Astutely attuned to widespread belief in the idea of “Russian standards,” Proryv highlights the electoral discrepancies between Russian and PMR to agitate for

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<sup>301</sup> Numerous informants involved with Transnistrian NGOs told me of their interactions with Soin when he worked with the MGB, the Ministry of State Security. Mostly these involved questioning NGO leaders about their funding sources and the purpose of their trips abroad for trainings and seminars.

<sup>302</sup> The term *piar*, from the abbreviation for public relations, has entered the Russian language without translation. A Russian dictionary (*Kratkii slovar' sovremnykh poniatii i terminov* 2002: 410) defines *piar* as “information in the mass media for publicity and image making as part of electoral technology.” Black *piar* applies to the formation of a negative opinion of an individual or political formation.

<sup>303</sup> Personal interview with D. Soin, November 11, 2008.

<sup>304</sup> That is, just as *United Russia* is the party of Putin, *Proryv* is the party for Russia. Both have a singular focus and remain electoral vehicles that

changes that would benefit their party.<sup>305</sup> Within the PMR, they agitate for freedom of speech, democracy, human rights, and an end to the Ministry of Information's blacklisting. There is a role for everybody. My role, Soin intimated, would be to publicize the plight of Proryv as it battled against the entrenched bureaucracy of the PMR state.<sup>306</sup> The PMR, Soin continued, was one large network system to be activated. Proryv's network contained a few hundred dedicated individuals, he explained, and they have programs in place to identify "like-minded people." These people would become the critical mass required for electoral success. "In a large country it would be difficult, but given that we have a small republic, here it is easier. As a sociologist I understand that."<sup>307</sup>

Proryv must be viewed in terms of the novelty it brings to the PMR. After the Russian financial crisis in 1998, the PMR elite found themselves presiding over a sustained period of stagnation. The war with Moldova had been won, and power had been consolidated. Authorities realized that military hardware was effective in creating political authority, it had less use in the information society where creating, distributing, diffusion, and manipulating information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity in its own right (Castells 2000). Never wanting to embrace democracy as an unknown, they found it easier to outsource its redefinition to a new class of informational professionals and political technologists. In the absence of a lasting political settlement, redefining the visible manifestations of politics was far easier.

Branding was central to Proryv's success in occupying an ideological niche. During my field research, an online "initiative group" called "New Left Path" appeared. It was to become the Communist Party of Bolsheviks, a clone of Eduard Limonov's *National Bolshevik Party*.

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<sup>305</sup> These include demands for party lists, reform of the executive branch, the liquidation of the post of vice president, and the naming of a prime minister, among other things.

<sup>306</sup> Personal interview with D. Soin, November 11, 2008.

<sup>307</sup> Personal interview with D. Soin, October 23, 2008.

Essentially, it would have been the third communist party in the region. The communist brand was already saturated, as there existed the Transnistria Communist Party (PKP) and the Communist Party of Transnistria (KPP-KPSU). The former is an opposition party, the latter a political party appearing only sporadically on Soviet holidays. The PKP controls the *Pravda* brand and publishes an opposition newspaper. Their denunciation of the looting of the region's Soviet industry has led them into direct confrontation with PMR authorities and Sheriff. The KPP-KPSU is a conservative communist party without representation at any level of government. Supported by the authorities to dilute the strength of the PKP, they are defined primarily by their banners than by anything else. As the "authorized" communist clone, state media covers them. The authorities fear the PKP because they agitate for investigating the privatization shady deals. They have a large constituency of pensioners and are the only party that does not see international recognition as the most important issue in the region. To paraphrase Warhol: one's a company, two's a crowd, and three's a party.

The Communist Party of Bolsheviks project never came to fruition; today its website is periodically updated with reposted stories from that deal with economic issues.<sup>308</sup> When I first broached the question as to whether this would be a genuine organization, Soin assured me that it was real, and furthermore, that I should partake, much like John Reed did in the Russian revolution.<sup>309</sup> Post-Soviet politics is marked by a proliferation of body doubles and clone parties that blur the distinction between what is real and fake. In the PMR, one can potentially speak of a single vested interest (Sheriff) that has created a simulacrum of political competition in order to

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<sup>308</sup> Originally located at <http://levput.wordpress.com/>, the site moved in May 2009 to <http://leftway-pmr.su/>. As of August 2010 the site had not been updated since June 2009.

<sup>309</sup> Reed's first person account of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days that Shook the World*, was a bestseller and was made into a Hollywood film with Warren Beatty. Reed's title also graces the famous film of Eisenstein, *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*.

prove that the PMR is a democratic country. Proryv is a minor player in Transnistrian politics, having a small constituency but leading visible actions.

## **The Information War**

*After the first bomb, the atom bomb, which was capable of using the energy of radioactivity to smash matter, the spectre of a second bomb is looming at the end of this millennium. This is the information bomb, capable of using the interactivity of information to wreck the peace between nations.*

Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*

The information war was a constant point of reference for Proryv. The information war constituted a scalable point of reference encompassing widely different situations.<sup>310</sup> Proryv's leader has long been involved in the information war with Moldova, even going as far as to author a dissertation on the subject. Soin stressed that initially Transnistria won the information war with Moldova. This victory was Pyrrhic insofar as it allowed old ways of thinking to be preserved; state officials continue to think within categories that are no longer effective. This failure to adapt to a changing world resulted in substantial losses. While the authorities cling to old technologies, the world operates with new ones. Soin found this failure to "market" the region appalling. He stressed to me that Transnistria carries an idea very close to the idea of the American Revolution – the right of nations to self-determination and the right of the people to revolt against unpopular policies.

Soin himself was not immune to "black" or negative PR. He was enmeshed in a scandal in 2005 that allegedly involved the sale of radioactive Alazan rockets to a British journalist

posing as an arms dealer.<sup>311</sup> During the time of the “Twitter revolution” in Moldova, Moldovan informants in Chişinău told me how Soin masterminded the riots.<sup>312</sup> Allegations of weapons smuggling have plagued the region since the early 1990s when self-defense forces appropriated arms from the 14<sup>th</sup> Army. Reports of arms smuggling typically take the form of de-contextualized reports by journalists who visit the region and “investigate” the sensational rumors of arms smuggling, human trafficking, and contraband.<sup>313</sup> Soin compared the allegations of weapons sales to Iraq’s WMDs: “I am a specialist of information wars, not uranium.” These stories were a boon to Proryv. After the rocket scandal broke, journalists sought him out for interviews and continue to. More often than not, he explained, they end up writing articles that were positive — engaging the information war on all fronts allows for negative information to become a means of furthering strategic objectives.

PMR officials were not immune to the shifting sands of the information field. President Igor Smirnov, following the lead of Dmitry Medvedev, created a video blog, a practice his successor now follows. New media becomes an emerging front in the information war, a means to critique ideological opponents. One interview on *YouTube* with the PMR’s feared Minister of State Security, Vladimir Antuifeev, uses the trope of double standards to dismiss the allegations of arms smuggling that have plagued the region for nearly two decades. Antuifeev calmly speaks of the infamous speech of Colin Powell before the UN General Assembly where he claimed to

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<sup>310</sup> The information war was used to frame political disputes with Moldova, intra-CIS disputes among Proryv fronts, intra-PMR disputes between political or economic competitors, or a means to ossify the idea of a post-Cold War division between Russia and NATO that conveyed geopolitical cachet on the PMR.

<sup>311</sup> “Radiation rockets on sale to ‘terrorists,’” *The Sunday Times*. May 8, 2005.

<sup>312</sup> This rumor, along with many others, turned out to be false. One rumor told of a Russian military personnel and arms being transported through the city in unmarked vans. Similar rumors circulated in Kiev during the Orange Revolution.

<sup>313</sup> Though most of my evidence is intuitive at best, many who come to the region looking to explore the outsized rumors tend to find what they are looking for if only because they are perceived as gullible foreigners. After all, what guide would pass up the opportunity to string together an adventure, especially if at some point there is a large potential payoff for the middleman.

have definitive evidence that Saddam Hussein was developing WMDs. The fact that this became a pretense for invading a sovereign country is not lost on people like Antuifiev and Soin. The same information systems that operate in our own hyper-mediated world are found in the PMR, where the existence of the state itself is at stake. Organizations like Proryv exploit the very real slippage between the rhetorical pronouncements of the West and their actions, and its supporters are aware of how the opinions of a select few create the (geo)political reality of the masses.

Economic interests also shape the emergent fronts of the information war. Economic interests like the Sheriff holding company exercise control over the only alternative to state-run television. On the political field, Sheriff has created numerous political parties that play the role of the soft opposition to the president. Vested economic interests like Sheriff (along with other regional enterprises) sponsor the forms that prolong and support the ongoing *dramaturgia* of politics in the PMR.<sup>314</sup> To preserve the status quo, parties interested in prolonging the PMR's existence reshape the contours of democracy. Today, the region boasts ten parties, an opposition controlling parliament, and regular elections. As needed, political technologists and PR specialists [*piarchiki*] are imported from Russia to fine-tune these formations.

### **The Social Field: *Proryv* in Context**

In the PMR, Marx's idea that the dominant ideas of any given time are those of the dominant class must be seen in the context of the necessity to maintain the larger political system at all costs. State institutions attempt to overcome the uncertainty of everyday life by projecting a coherent sense of belonging. This translates into attempts to control the inputs and outputs of

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<sup>314</sup> This process of business interests dictating the forms taken by politics is discussed in detail by Andrew Wilson in *Virtual Politics*. He mentions how Moldova is small state with a small number of entities actively creating parties: "Moldova is almost entirely a virtual state, with a narrow range of interests operating behind a shifting pattern of party labels." (Wilson 2005: 46).

politics. Unable to offer tangible growth or a decent standard of living, the state must appeal to intuition in order to efface the very high material costs of Transnistrian (in)dependence.<sup>315</sup> The PMR is *our way, control over our land and destiny*. Out of this ambiguity emerge dichotomous, scalable logics that offer coherency: the dialectic of controlling/controlled (the former the ostensible goal of the state, the latter its apotheosis); the logics of ours [*svoi*] – strange [*chuzhoi*]; the domestic as good, the foreign bad. The views of those controlling the means of production (initially material, now largely symbolic) become state policy. At the level of policy and political discourse, the state and those authorized to speak on its behalf supply the inputs to politics. Politics is control, not choice.

Residents remain suspicious of outsiders and their ideas. Many linked their precarious material situation to foreign ideas like democracy and capitalism. Ideas originating from unfamiliar places are bad. It is a less authoritarian version of what Selim (2009) describes in Uzbekistan. The minutiae of research – requests that remain unanswered, doors that do not stay open – prove this. Selim talks about the intrusion of governmental prerogatives in the social sciences. This is the case in the PMR too, where the basic terms of the field of politics itself are policed by these unwritten yet implicitly understood prerogatives: independence as affirmed and performed by the people, loyalty to Russia is the central tenet of the state, and negotiations with Moldova must occur on an equal basis. These assumptions, once stubborn negotiating tactics or abstract ideas, now form the reality of political life in left-bank Moldova. A case like Uzbekistan contrasts the penetration of market-based imperatives in scholarship in core countries, where universities are increasingly forced to submit to managerial thinking and economic demands. From the periphery, from a place like the PMR, it is clear how the unstated assumptions of a

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<sup>315</sup> For more on this see Project Impact's edited volume *Moldova-Transnistria: Working Together for a Prosperous Future: Economic Aspects*. Cu Drag Publishing House, Chişinău, 2009.



country influence its subsequent knowledge production. In the United States, geopolitical hegemony of the US and of capital remains uncritically accepted. In a place like the PMR, whose existence is predicated on geopolitical intrigue, local social knowledge serve as integral components of the local cosmology.

### **Ethnographic encounters with the Information War**

During field research I found myself to be a target in an emerging front of the information war. The conflict involved a local blogger from the Eurasianist Union of Youth, a group associated with the Eurasianist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin.<sup>316</sup> Dugin's 1997 work, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, advocates not a military means of achieving Russian dominance but a "sophisticated program of subversion, destabilization, and disinformation spearheaded by the Russian special services, supported by a tough, hard-headed use of Russia's gas, oil, and natural resource riches to pressure and bully other countries into bending to Russia's will." (Dunlop, n.d.)<sup>317</sup> Local historians have constructed a historiography in which the PMR is the culmination of various peoples seeking to live peacefully with their Orthodox brethren, with Russia.<sup>318</sup> Eurasianist doctrine views Moldova as part of the "Russian South" that will be bound to Moscow at the expense of ties with the "rational-individualistic West" (Dugin 389, cited in Dunlop, n.d.). In Transnistria, Eurasianist philosophy serves as an antidote to anything overtly pro-Western or

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<sup>316</sup> Dugin's ideas are heavily indebted to Karl Haushofer, the founder of the *geopolitik* school of thought that came to play an outsized role in Nazi Germany via his student, Rudolf Hess. Of particular importance is Haushofer's view of frontiers not as political or natural boundaries, but as fluid and determined by the will of particular groups.

<sup>317</sup> This is remarkably similar to the role played by the PMR as it relates to the geopolitical orientation of the Republic of Moldova: as long as the PMR exists, the Russian Federation has a direct means of ensuring that Moldova remains a sovereign state in name only.

<sup>318</sup> This is mostly the work of a historical research center at Transnistrian State University. For an overview of Transnistrian historiography in English see Solonari 2003.

funded by Western interests.<sup>319</sup> Insofar as it polices the contours of politics in the region, Eurasianism serves as a compass oriented to Moscow.

In May 2009, a blogger affiliated with Dugin's Eurasianist Union of Youth from posted an entry entitled "Orange Proryv."<sup>320</sup> The entry constituted a multi-pronged attack on Proryv's leadership.<sup>321</sup> It voiced alarm at Proryv's involvement with "geopolitical competitors" of Russia, and detailed the ineffective measures of Proryv's flash mobs and "ritual" marches. The post asked why, at a time of crisis, Proryv's leaders seemed more interested in obtaining funding than actually doing something. In his view, the organization had turned from a tool for political change into an organization on a path to irrelevancy. Despite claiming kinship with Eurasianism, Proryv was under the influence of "Orange" forces. Proryv's youth leadership regularly engaged with representatives of Western embassies and foundations, and the organization gave cover to a Romanian journalist suspected of gathering sensitive data on strategic facilities within the PMR. Proryv's leaders met regularly with a US citizen (myself) "who most likely plans to exploit the opportunities of the corporation." The entry ended with a call to make Proryv accountable for its questionable use of the image of Russia for narrow and selfish purposes. "We are not indifferent, then, as to what direction Transnistrian society will develop, and furthermore, today the image of

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<sup>319</sup> Commonly cited covert funding of anti-PMR activities include George Soros, the US Embassy, Boris Berezovsky, or the Romanian government. Whether or not any of these entities actually fund projects in the region remains an open question. That said, rumors circulate widely and disinformation is common. For example, I helped prepare a grant for a sociological research center associated with Proryv through the US embassy Democracy Initiative Small Grants project. The grant was denied, and was under \$5,000. Soon after submitting the grant I heard rumors circulated that Proryv had received a grant from the US embassy (cited amounts ranged from \$10,000 to \$20,000).

<sup>320</sup> The initial article and its numerous responses are examples of "black *piar*," a term that in Russian means the formation of a negative opinion of someone or something (Ledeneva 2006: 33).

<sup>321</sup> Vladimir Bukarski, "Orange Proryv: Continuation" <http://bukarskii.livejournal.com/730916.html> Accessed August 22, 2011.

Russia is used by the self-serving leadership of the corporation. Please adequately respond to the provocative activities of Proryv!”<sup>322</sup>

Proryv’s information bomb locked onto the blogger in question. First, his biography and life trajectory became fodder for ridicule. His itinerant stints in Chişinău, Tiraspol, Israel, and Moscow became the wanderings of an individual who could never quite find his place, trying out various religions and ideologies before settling on an ultra-Orthodox Eurasianist identity. Proryv’s response, “The Kiss of Judas, Vladimir Bukarskii,” detailed his peripatetic ideological path that included stints as a Zionist, a democrat, extreme rightist, and neo-Nazi.<sup>323</sup> The article ended with a link to a video of Bukarskii praising Mussolini. Reposted on *Lenta PMR* and other websites, the information contained in the article came “from the case files of Consulting Mobile.”

This information bomb also targeted the leader of the Eurasianist movement, Aleksandr Dugin. Numerous articles appeared which were thinly veiled attacks on his personal life. One article alluded to Dugin’s bisexuality and involvement with the occult. Entitled “The Gay Reich of Dugin,” the article was posted on *Lenta PMR* but later disappeared. This front closed as quickly as it appeared, with the articles simply disappearing from *Lenta PMR*’s servers. The blogs that started the dispute were updated less frequently, and eventually became frozen relics of this forgotten front in the information war.

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<sup>322</sup> This slander was potentially damaging to Proryv, since the post brought attention to the fact that Proryv sought grants and sponsors in both Russia and the West. Vis-à-vis Proryv’s brand friendly, Che-themed revolution, Eurasianism enjoys strong support among influential political circles in Moscow. Its foundational texts are taught in social science departments and in government institutions that train diplomats, military officers, and intelligence professionals. It would not be an understatement to say that it enjoys significant support within the Kremlin.

<sup>323</sup> Not knowing him personally, I withhold judgment as to whether these facts are true or false.

## On Activism and Ideology

Many interlocutors in both right and left-bank Moldova often would ask what exactly Proryv did and what the organization stood for. Perhaps outsider status allowed them to revisit a phenomenon that they instinctively dismissed yet longed to learn about. As a regular participant, my position both as a scholar and an invited foreign guest offered me unique access to the group. For ethnographic purposes, I offer a composite sketch of the meetings I attended.<sup>324</sup> Typically, I would attend weekly organizational meetings and planned political actions.

Proryv meetings began with a series of chants accompanied by raised fists that serve as a call to order: *Che Guevara – Glory! Heroes – Glory! Russia – Glory! Transnistria – Glory!*<sup>325</sup> One felt the crowd emerge as they were called to order. Youths who had only moments before been milling around, talking, jostling for a computer screen, or slouching on tables were suddenly transformed into a mass that that shouted with a single voice: the revolutionary body. Meetings were occasions to discuss organizational issues and plan future actions. Mundane organizational tasks were broken up by the occasional movie night, chess tournament, or sports competition. The progress of the activist groups of ten [*desyatok*] was assessed, with commendations or criticism given publicly in a group setting.<sup>326</sup>

Self-criticism and discipline were central themes of meetings. Often, a meeting would begin with a dressing down by Soin or the executive director due to low attendance and a lack of overall participation, problems during the summer months. This presented an opportunity for self-criticism of an individual and organizational nature. Proryv needed to be running like clockwork and activists must be ready, should the need arise. Dressing down was an attempt to

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<sup>324</sup> I attended approximately twenty-five Proryv meetings over the course of fieldwork. These are presented as a single meeting in order to forefront the experience and feel of meetings.

<sup>325</sup> Че Геваре – Слава! Героям – Слава! России – Слава! Приднестровью-Слава.

get activists to understand themselves in the context of forces beyond their control. He often inserted them into hypothetical situations (i.e., “turbulent times, when your republic needs you”) or quotidian ones (“when somebody asks you what Proryv stands for”). Activists should be able to respond to geopolitical, republican, and ideological queries. The existing PR materials are tools for building Proryv’s ideology and espousing its views.

In the context of an information war, everybody was a potential member. Once, Soin spoke of how there was a real need to educate others (strangers, family members, parents, and friends) about what Proryv does. During one meeting, activists discussed plans for holding an open house at the Che Guevara School. Proryv needed to counter the belief that it is a place for nationalists or social outcasts and show others that this was not the case.<sup>327</sup> To convey authenticity, they discussed how they must demonstrate that they carry an ideology [*provodit’ ideologiyu*]. The active construction of this public self-image creates a positive image of the organization and allows them to become carriers of an ideology [*nositel’ ideologiyu*]. If each member becomes a vessel, this will attract people [*privlekaet lyudeij*]. Yet success is not solely measured in political terms. Proryv seeks to create a healthy way of life and to form healthy, holistic individuals. This focus on wellness stands in stark contrast with other political movements concerned solely with patriotism. Vis-à-vis other parties that offer a standard political platform, Proryv sets itself up as a total experience, an ideology of life. I thought back to a conversation I had years ago with a local man who did home renovations. Unable to procure what customers wanted locally, he would go to Odessa and buy “contraband” components. For

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<sup>326</sup> These groups, made up of a senior activist and young followers, would train and mentor young members in various Proryv activities and track attendance and participation in contests and other activities.

<sup>327</sup> During research, I benefited from my position as an outsider, which enabled me to be taken within the context of Proryv’s drive for openness. As mentioned above, there was a marked stress on inviting outsiders in, on making Proryv open and more hospitable to counteract rumors, which potentially might damage its image. The leaders stressed the need to talk and to show exactly what Proryv is from the inside. During my time in the region, Proryv

Transnistrians, he said, there is simply no choice: “People buy not what they want – they buy what they can here.” The situation is similar in politics: people “buy” into what political formations exist, not necessarily ones that they feel strongly about. Proryv fulfills the demand for novelty and variety.

During one summer meeting, they discussed a planned trip to the northern regions of Transnistria. The trip would be part action, part recreation. The first leg of the journey would consist of marches, public agitation and distribution of printed materials. On the return trip, there would be visits to monasteries, waterfalls, and other touristic points. The geographic and cultural diversity the PMR would be taken in, ideologized, and enjoyed by activists. The terms used to describe their activities – agitprop, ideological work – harkened back to a revolutionary vocabulary in which the newspaper was the printed organ of the party, and ideology was something explicitly crafted and openly discussed. Such a vocabulary gave credence to the notion that the events that gave birth to the PMR truly were revolutionary.

Reciprocity was an integral aspect of the organization. Soin intoned that, “what you get, you must give to others,” echoing the gift as posed by Marcel Mauss. Activists received training and experience from the organization, and in turn they served it. On more than one occasion Soin described Proryv as something that he built but that now gives youth a productive outlet to realize themselves.<sup>328</sup> In this context of providing, Proryv leaders slip into paternalistic roles, offering information, advice, and mentorship for youth. Proryv gave individuals a place where they could receive guidance that would otherwise be provided by the school, the state, or the church.

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hosted guests from Germany, Finland, Romania, Austria, Belgium, and France (in addition to guests from less exotic locales like Russia and Ukraine).

Participation entailed responsibilities. Activists were expected to be able to recite to others what Proryv stands for. In light of Proryv's printed materials, Soin stressed that this should not be hard. To illustrate this point, he took a brochure and opened it. The pamphlet contained a series of talking points from the Proryv manifesto: it listed seven things Proryv was for and seven they were against. Activists were expected to be prepared to articulate exactly what Proryv is. Original thought was not stressed, and the finer points of the party platform were not subject to debate. The executive committee creates the materials that activists disseminate. It is a factory model: goods, products, and ideas are created and produced in a material form (pamphlets, flags, etc.) and "sold" through marketing.

Meetings closed with the Proryv song. Its musical accompaniment sounds like the soundtrack to a spaghetti Western, with the pounding beat building to a crescendo that produces a rousing call to action. This song contains many of the more esoteric aspects of Proryv's ideology – e.g., Proryv's followers being "children of the sun" seeking to bring forth a bright future. The emphasis on the future implicates Proryv in a structurally similar teleology to the Soviet project in which present difficulties were endured for the sake of building socialism for the future. Important meetings included the singing of the Transnistrian and Russian anthems. With the Transnistrian anthem, there was often confusion about the words.<sup>329</sup> Despite being the official anthem of the PMR, the anthem appeared to have been rarely sung; its presence in the everyday repertoire of activists appeared diminished, especially compared to the Russian

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<sup>328</sup> This issue of youth and alcohol is depressing. I personally witnessed youth as young as twelve purchasing vodka and other drinks which they consume on the riverfront embankment. With few other opportunities, youth turn to what is readily available and inexpensive: alcohol and cigarettes.

<sup>329</sup> Typically the Transnistrian anthem was sung only when there was an "international" activity (e.g., a roundtable or forum) or when guests from Russia were in attendance (e.g., an event with representatives from the United Russia Party or other Russian youth organizations). The Transnistrian anthem is based upon a 1943 composition "Long live our State" (Да здравствует наша держава), one of the tunes proposed to be the anthem of the Soviet Union.

anthem. Few knew the words, and activists fumbled as if reciting a long-forgotten prayer, moving their lips while waiting for it to end.<sup>330</sup>

### ***S dnem rozhdeniya! Proryv Turns Four***

Proryv celebrated its fourth anniversary on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009. Proryv's self-presentation to in these times affords additional insight into the organization's practices and PR. The events included a roundtable discussion, a meeting with the PMR president, a picnic, and an *avtoprobeg* (car rally). On May 31<sup>st</sup>, an "international youth roundtable forum" was held at the Che Guevara school. Entitled "International Cooperation in the Context of the Global Crisis," the forum included representatives from local political parties; a representative from the Moscow branch of Young Guard, *Molodaya Gvardia*, the youth wing United Russia; and the leader of a Crimean NGO. The subsequent press release stressed that Proryv had united all of these groups under the banner of their singular commonality, their desire to be with Russia.

Notable for its unanimous affirmation of a vague "future cooperation with Russian organizations," the roundtable was a time for generalities and affirmations. Each representative was given a few minutes to speak, which typically entailed an introduction and a list of their past, current, and future projects. No members of the audience posed any questions. During his speech, Soin took the opportunity to position Transnistria in the same light as South Ossetia. He spoke about the attack on South Ossetia and stressed the fact that Russia acted decisively and protected its citizens. He stressed the commonalities between South Ossetia and Transnistria, noting both the number of victims and the common fates of the regions. Both are located in conflict zones in which Russia guarantees peace and stability. This harks back to phenomena

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<sup>330</sup> The Russian anthem typically garnered a rousing performance; accompaniment alternated between the standard orchestral version and a modern rock one recorded by the Russian band *Lube*. When I asked about the choice of



described in chapter three. The dead are a vital repository of excess, unsymbolized negativity that serve as a reminder of what could happen if Russia ceased to maintain peace. This specter of death and destruction is the centerpiece of PMR statehood ideology. This sequence of events becomes part of a larger narrative of belonging with Russia that is affirmed by the presence of international guests. Russian and Ukrainian guests spoke of the hospitality locals had shown them, and of how they now have a feel for what the PMR truly is. They promised to tell others back home of the plight of Transnistrians. One delegate from *Molodaya Gvardia* discussed future cooperation through summer work camps, which constitute an important geographically and symbolic link between the region and the Russian Federation. Through these camps, youth not only have the opportunity to earn money (a patriotic antidote to the burgeoning work-travel business with the United States), but also to see “with their own eyes the endless expanse of Mother Russia.”

The presence of delegates from *Molodaya Gvardia*, the youth wing of Putin’s *United Russia* party was a trump card for Proryv. At a post-roundtable gathering, the problems of the region were posed to foreign delegates: uncooperative officials, the high entry barrier for parties, and the difficulty of participating in elections. These issues, unable to be solved internally, were subjected to the expert opinion of a representative member of Putin’s party. The presence of Putin’s *United Russia* conveyed a symbolic cachet upon Proryv that they leveraged into a meeting with the PMR President. The subsequent press release connected their discussion with the need for reform. “Of course, interest in such matters is not accidental – during the previous month Transnistria has been shaken by political struggle at the highest level ... the youth could

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music, one activist responded that they had changed it because the Soviet music was “too sad.”

not deny themselves the pleasure of listening to Russians, and finally discussing the same set of problems that today occupy the minds of the highest officials of the Transnistrian state.”<sup>331</sup>

The anniversary picnic was delayed due to the fact that Proryv and its guests were meeting with the PMR President.<sup>332</sup> The pre-party meeting began with a speech that positioned Proryv as a place for youth who have no other place. Rhetorically, Soin’s speech positioned Proryv as an antidote to youth inaction in politics; Proryv does not turn anyone away, and they do not indoctrinate. “Proryv is not against anything, we are only for things.” From course offerings to the social activities, the ideology of negativity is replaced by positive self-development. The culmination of the meeting was the graduation of new activists and the presentation of party cards. The ceremony was rushed because of the delayed start; each graduate was presented with a party card and/or activist ID and congratulated by Proryv’s leaders. Each paused for photographs as diplomas were presented. Recipients lingered for pictures with presenters and guests. Recognition remained important insofar as Proryv was a place where activists were acknowledged, where they learned valuable skills, and where they received guidance. As I witnessed graduation, the idea that activists were paid or otherwise induced to participate seemed remote (most of my informants from the local university assumed that activists were paid for their participation). After the ceremony, everybody marched with Proryv banners to a local café where a field kitchen was set up outside with grilled chicken, *plov* (a Central Asian rice dish), cabbage salad, and assorted non-alcoholic beverages (at the meeting that preceded the party beer was promised, which bought spontaneous applause from all in

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<sup>331</sup> “International Youth Forum in Tiraspol,” June 2, 2009. <http://www.tiras.ru/evrazija/9729-molodezhnyji-mezhdunarodnyjj-forum-v.html> Accessed August 23, 2011

<sup>332</sup> From INFOtag Information Agency Digest 3.6.2009 “Transnistrian President Igor Smirnov has signed an order about the setting-up of a Council of Enterprise Directors in order to provide economic stability and to minimize the influence of the world financial crisis on the PMR national economy. The Council included Presidential Advisor for Industry, ex-Minister Anatoly Blashku. Earlier a Public Council was set up in Transnistria and on Monday the matter was of a possible setting-up of a Youth Council by the Transnistrian President.”

attendance). Astutely aware of public appearances, activists had been warned not to come in dirty or disheveled clothes. Individuals who regularly smoked around the group went behind the building to remain out of sight. After an hour, the food ran out and the police showed up to guide the traditional Proryv car rally [*avtoprobe*] down the streets of Tiraspol.



**Fig. 13.** Typical Proryv march on the streets of Tiraspol. Photo by author.

## The Spectacle of Politics: *Avtoprobegi*

The Russian word *avtoprobeg* translates as car rally. An *avtoprobeg* usually follows a particular route and is planned with particular political goals in mind.<sup>333</sup> Proryv's car rallies were not so grand and are held annually on Russia Day, Day of the Russian Flag, Constitution Day, Proryv's anniversary, and in response to various local events (e.g., the 2006 referendum and the economic blockade).

Proryv's Day of Russia *avtoprobeg* consisted of a parade of more than fifty cars, taxis, and motorcycles.<sup>334</sup> Each flew a different flag, with the repertoire including the Russian tricolor, yellow Proryv flags, PMR flags, and a lone *Molodaya Gvardia* flag. In this *avtoprobeg*, as in other Proryv marches, flags serve as visual citations and change. Some banners are made for specific events and decorated with slogans, while others constitute part of a regular repertoire. Flags and banners of other organizations, typically received as gifts, are added to subsequent *avtoprobegi* and marches in order to stress Proryv's international ties. While the PMR views itself as a sovereign state, at any given rally the majority of flags were Russian.

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<sup>333</sup> One notable *avtoprobeg* follows the military exploits of Alexander Nevsky. Another *avtoprobeg* sponsored by the United Russia party, the "Great Path of Russian Civilization," begins on the shores of the Báltic and ends at the Pacific port of Vladivostock.

<sup>334</sup> June 13th, 2009.





**Fig 14.** Preparations for Proryv’s fourth anniversary *avtoprobeg*. Photo by author.

This particular *avtoprobeg* contained a number of foreign cars: a Landcruiser, a few Audis, and other foreign cars. The bulk of the other cars were local taxis. As the rally passed the central square, activists distributed calendars and trinkets to bystanders and congratulated them on Day of Russia. Special materials were printed up for this holiday. A small laminated calendar depicting the two-headed eagle with the image of St. George slaying the dragon was imprinted upon the background of the Russian flag. Written directly under the eagle crest was “Proryv!” and “We are Russia!” (*My – Rossiya*); the back of the plastic card contained a calendar. The calendars handed out on Day of Russia Day were thick and laminated.<sup>335</sup>

The *Lenta PMR* press release included pictures of activists handing out printed materials. Entitled, “In the heart of every Transnistrian is the Day of Russia,” the press release added a

historical dimension to the phenomenon of the *avtoprobeg*.<sup>336</sup> The article paints Russia Day as the logical culmination of regional history in which the PMR remains a citadel of Russian interests, as it has since the time of Suvorov and the earliest Cossack settlements.

*Avtoprobegy* are but one component of the larger political spectacle. The parade itself is stage-managed to offer spectators a ready-made visualization of politics to prove civil society exists.<sup>337</sup> These visible manifestations of civil society are important insofar as they support the widespread belief that Russia is the only loyal supporter of the PMR. Proryv seeks to domesticate these beliefs for their own benefit. Maintaining these connections, real or imagined will lead to success in the domestic political arena. Vis-à-vis Moldova, which has, to varying degrees of success, oriented itself to the West after the EU accession of Romania, in the PMR all hopes for a viable (if dependent) polity lead through Russia. During public holidays, political rallies, and protests, I never once saw the Moldovan flag. Displaying any national flag besides the Russian, Transnistrian, Soviet, or Ukrainian is simply not possible, as they lie outside the field of proper politics (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

The parades, the explicit construction and marketing of ideology, and the public spectacles are not limited to Proryv. Other local political formations display a similar structure in which ideology emerges alongside a visual display. Banners, flags, parades of people, lines of cars are but some of the ways that politics emerges visually. This notion of visibility is important, one local political analyst stressed, because the subsequent photographs “show” that a vibrant civil society and democracy exist in the region. Civil society is a matter of visibility, about

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<sup>335</sup> Even among people who do not support Proryv, I have found Proryv *agit-prop* materials. Most of the items are practical (calendars, small notebooks, notepads, pencils, pens, etc.) so that people hold on to them even if they disagree.

<sup>336</sup> «ПРОРЫВ!»: В сердце каждого приднестровца – День России “Proryv: In the heart of every Transnistrian is the Day of Russia” <http://www.tiras.ru/2009/06/13/proryv-v-serdce-kazhdogo-pridnestrovca.html>

showing that there is a vibrant civil society in the PMR. Individuals and groups critical of the PMR leadership flatly state there is no civil society here - all movements and social groups in the region lack a constituency. For example, the much-heralded OSTK, an organization associated with the PMR's earliest moves toward independence, is ostensibly formed from local factories.<sup>338</sup> Though the region's factories are shuttered, the organization is presented in the media as if it represents the factories and workers of a boom time. Most OSTK members are pensioners who have turned it into a vessel for expressing their singular vision of politics. The fact that photographers and participants vastly outnumber spectators raises the questions of audience – exactly what purpose do these actions have, and for whom are they organized?

These actions bring together multiple layers of an already over-determined reality: the ideological level, the visual, and the material. The public parade and visualization of politics allows for a sense of belonging to emerge for participants that intuitively makes sense of life in the region. In such a situation, even for non-political residents, the PMR is part of a larger feeling, of an unrealized destiny — it is the closest thing they have to preserving the Soviet Union. To paraphrase Baudrillard, the less genuine copy can have a similar if not greater salience in the absence of any externally generated symbols.

### **The Spectacle Continues: “Peace in Palestine, Gas in Transnistria!”**

In early January 2009, I received word that Proryv was planning a march entitled “Peace in Palestine, Gas in Transnistria.” Set to occur on January 14th, the march brought together two widely different events – the Ukraine-Russia gas crisis of early 2009 and the ongoing Middle

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<sup>337</sup> Typically there are a small number of spectators, based upon my observations and informal surveys. That said, the fact that they take place among the busiest central streets allows for much passive observation. Despite this fact most people generally glance at the rally and continue going about their business.

East conflict.<sup>339</sup> The march reflected Proryv's desire to connect its activism to world events.

While ostensibly for a domestic audience, the action's subtext alludes to the fact that, far from denying the world beyond the PMR, Proryv actively creates a space for itself in it. Curiously, Proryv was denied permission to hold the march without reason.<sup>340</sup> Proryv turned this non-event into a means to voice criticism of local authorities and to strengthen their image as an oppositional force fighting an entrenched local bureaucracy.

The proposed march was to go from the Che Guevara School to steps of the OSCE mission. The idea linked two widely divergent events with radically different origins: the escalation of the conflict in Palestine and the ongoing gas crisis in Transnistria.<sup>341</sup> The march was organized in conjunction with the Transnistrian branch of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR).<sup>342</sup> When I arrived at the Che Guevara School, I found twenty LDPR representatives armed with flags preparing to march. This constituted significantly more people than any other Proryv action I had witnessed. As the local supporters of the local branch of a party founded by the well-known nationalist noisemaker Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the LDPR contingent were visibly older and their presence visibly contrast with Proryv's young image.

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<sup>338</sup> OSTK, the United Work Collective Council (Объединенный Совет трудовых коллективов) is the organization that led the political movement for Transnistrian independence.

<sup>339</sup> The Russia-Ukraine gas dispute of 2009 arose as a result of a pricing dispute between Russia and Ukraine when Russian Gazprom refused to conclude a supply contract for 2009 unless Ukrainian gas company Naftogaz paid its accumulating debts for gas previously consumed. The dispute began in 2008 with a series of failed negotiations, and on January 1 Russia cut off gas supplies to Ukraine. On January 7, the dispute turned to crisis when all Russian gas flows through Ukraine were halted for thirteen days, completely cutting off supplies to Southeastern Europe, most of which depends on Russian gas, and partially to other European countries.

<sup>340</sup> This denial is addressed in more detail below.

<sup>341</sup> As a result of the gas dispute between Ukraine and Russia in January 2009, gas supplies to the region were significantly decreased. Factories lost supplies, central heating supplies were disrupted, and there were even bread shortages as bakeries had no fuel for production. The dispute highlighted the precarious economic position of the region, and how its outstanding gas debt afforded little leverage in a time of crisis.

<sup>342</sup> The Transnistrian branch of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, a party formed by the ultra nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky in 1990. A populist noisemaker, Zhirinovsky is best known dreaming of the day when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the Indian Ocean. A staunch supporter of separatism across the Soviet Union, he remarked that Romania was an artificial state created by Italian Gypsies who seized territory from Russia, Bulgaria, and Hungary. See Fedarko, Donnelly, and Graff, 1994, "Hello, I Must Be Going" Time Magazine, January 10, 1994.



When I stepped inside, people were milling around and preparations had begun. The deputy director of LDPR was in attendance rallying the troops, and everybody was busy with preparations. There was a much more energetic feeling than typical meetings. A cameraman from *Lenta PMR* was on hand to document the meeting. Soin opened the meeting with Proryv's customary invocation and call to order: *Glory to Russia! Glory to Che Guevara! Glory to Transnistria! Glory to the LDPR!* In his introduction, Russia played an outsized rhetorical role. His use of phrases such as "we love Russia" and "Russia gives to us" hinted at Russian aid to the region. He continued by citing Russian beneficence in the sphere of pensions and social aid.<sup>343</sup> Proryv stood for good relations with Russia and for loyalty to Russia. Maintaining this relationship results in increased aid for those that need it most. Yet because of bickering within the PMR, because of the actions of authorities, Russia had ceased to continue to give generously and without question to the region.

His speech addressed the impact of the gas crisis on the region. Any discussion of natural gas in Transnistria touches upon a raw political nerve, since natural gas is subsidized in the PMR. People pay for gas, but the authorities use the money gathered to finance their budget. People resented the fact that the region did not control its energy resources.<sup>344</sup> While he pointed out that the day before partial supplies had been restored, he lingered on two unknowns: how long the gas will flow and how much it will cost. The victims of this gas dispute were the region's pensioners, children, and orphans. The poor are left to bear the cross of this political dispute between Ukraine, a neighbor, and Russia, the PMR's sponsor. He talked about his proposal to develop strategic gas reserves to prevent future crises yet was careful not to blame Ukraine. The gas crisis left PMR authorities exposed, since they remained responsible for

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<sup>343</sup> Soin was quick to point out that then, in 2009, this aid was then absent due to the neglect of this relationship by authorities.

making sure that gas is provided for its citizens. In essence, Proryv pointed out the duplicity of the state's actions - taking gas it fails to pay for. The authorities responded to this perceived provocation by forbidding the march because of the undue attention it drew to this touchy subject.

The second theme of the march – Peace in Palestine – offered an explicit international comparison between the PMR and Palestine. Soin laid out a narrative that linked the struggles for a Palestinian state to their own armed conflict with Moldova: both were bloody, both were the result of nationalist policies, and both struggle for international recognition in the face of international double standards. The march would have ended at the OSCE, chosen because of its international mandate in the region.<sup>345</sup> Returning to the theme of gas, he stressed that while houses were now being heated, uncertainty persists. His words emphasized a lingering uncertainty, something neither good nor bad but which allows for the worst-case scenario to be at hand for rhetorical invocation.

Later, over coffee, Soin speculated as to why permission was not granted. He stressed that their initiative to create strategic gas reserves had upset the authorities by drawing undue attention to the region's significant gas debt.<sup>346</sup> Proryv had taken too much initiative at a time when discontent was rising. The subsequent press release describing the non-march and linked it and Proryv with events occurring on the world-stage.<sup>347</sup> The title, “The March which did not take place, or who is against peace in Palestine and gas in Transnistria?” was a salvo directed against those responsible for blocking the march. The press release stressed the fact that Proryv quickly

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<sup>344</sup> By the time of his speech (January 15th, 2009), gas supplies had been restored to the region.

<sup>345</sup> The OSCE is the only recognized international office operating in the PMR

<sup>346</sup> The PMR owes nearly \$2 billion dollars to Gazprom for two decades of gas. Residents pay their gas bills, but the bill never gets paid; this constitutes an unofficial means of financing the government.

<sup>347</sup> Марш, который не состоялся или кому противен мир в Палестине и газ в Приднестровье? “The March which did not take place, or who is against peace in Palestine and gas in Transnistria?”

<http://www.tiras.ru/2009/01/19/marsh-kotoryjj-ne-sostojsja-ili-komu.html> Accessed August 23, 2011.

reacts to political events by bringing them to the public's attention. Proryv stands ready to react quickly to political events both inside and outside the PMR, as was the case during the blockade, the 2006 referendum, and the tragic events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

This Proryv action is a performance of what can be called *dependence as independence*. Unable to exercise independence, the only available option is to offer up another performance with the slate of characters: Transnistria plays the victim, caught amidst forces beyond its control, and Russia emerges as the sole problem solver. This situation of dependency was not lost on one resident who described the region as a country of beggars [*strana poprashaikov*]. The trope of crisis is a potent political tool. Every year since 2006 a new crisis emerges that demands new forms of aid and external assistance. The economic blockade (2006) was followed by drought (2007) and floods (2008). Presently, the PMR is in the grips of the world economic crisis (2008-present). With each crisis, the people are rhetorically mobilized to think the worst, and the authorities give voice to this notion of a people under siege by external forces. In this *dramaturgia*, only one true savior emerges: Russia.

The visible manifestations of groups like Proryv constitute the most elementary and didactic form of a message residents receive in a variety of forms. From the passports people are encouraged to get (Russian or Ukrainian, but not Moldovan), to the language they use (Russian), to the media they watch (Russian), to the regional power they believe will deliver them from evil (Russia), much of social and political life in the PMR is oriented around constructing a discourse that acknowledges the support of Russia and seeks to domesticate it. In the PMR, "Russia" is a shifter, a linguistic term without a fixed meaning. As such, it changes its valence and content according to the context in which it is used (Gal 1991: 444). As a physical object, a country, Russia lies hundreds of miles away. This distance, however, does not preclude its invocation as a

fundamental tenet of PMR politics. Russia is the contemporary political component to the sense of belonging provided by the 1992 war, which is modeled according to the *Great Patriotic War*.

The political life of this non-event was prolonged when Proryv decided to pursue the matter in court. By the time the case came up, gas had long been restored and spring had arrived. As an international guest of Proryv, I was invited to attend the trial as an observer. The trial consisted of Proryv's attorney reading out their complaint orally, having the complaint taken down in writing by the court (protocol). Their complaint was two pages long. During the proceedings, two other observers from the OSCE and the British Embassy were present. Apart from these observers, their lawyer, and myself the only other person in court was a lone Proryv employee. Initially, she introduced me as a representative of the US Embassy, to which I explained that I was merely an independent observer.

The court itself was housed in a drab building off Tiraspol's main street. Proceedings were archaic, with hand-written protocols. At the building entrance hearing schedules, room assignments, and judge assignments were handwritten and posted on the walls. The distinct rituals marking the justice system as the domain of the state – the swearing in, the pageantry – were absent. The judge was seated behind an old wood-laminate desk, and behind him on the wall hung a framed portrait of the PMR president and the PMR flag. The judge appeared bored by the proceedings, surfing the internet on his desktop computer. He challenged the lawsuit on the grounds that it had no merit since they were not asking for the action to be held, just a decision that said the initial denial was unjust. Officials refused to answer their complaint in court, not deeming it worthy. The judge appeared disinclined to believe that their human rights had been violated.

Fifteen minutes into the proceedings, the leader of the political party and other Proryv activists showed up, hoping to join the proceedings. The judge refused them entry, saying that that the session had already begun. Clearly, the judge was aware of Proryv's penchant for public relations. Any attempt to make the meeting a spectacle would have to wait until after the hearing. Proryv made reference to the Constitution of the PMR, to the document that founds the republic and becomes the foundational metric of 'law' in an area that is outside the bounds of 'recognized' law. Eventually, the court eventually found the decision of the city administration to be unlawful, giving the organization a symbolic victory.<sup>348</sup> This court appearance was the first of two that culminated with a serious case of slander brought against Proryv after municipal elections in May 2010. The second suit sought to close their newspaper by fining it nearly \$100,000 ostensibly for stating in print exactly how much a city council seat could be bought for. Had Proryv shed its mantle of a virtual opposition party and thrown down a challenge to the ruling authorities?

### **Economics, Politics, Spectacles: The Anti-Crisis March(es)**

On December 27, 2008, Tiraspol felt the full force of the world economic crisis. Awareness of the economic crisis did not spike because of a sudden devaluation of the currency, or because of gloomy economic pronouncements in the media. Proryv attempted to bring this crisis to the public's attention through an anti-crisis march. The march did not seek to blunt the effects of the crisis, nor did it offer practical solutions. Instead, Proryv marched to voice their

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<sup>348</sup> Суд удовлетворил иск ММК-НДП «ПРОРЫВ!» к главе госадминистрации Тирасполя. Костырко, ты не прав! [The court granted the petition of the ММК-NPD "Proryv." To the head of the city administration: Kostyrko, you are wrong!] <http://www.tiras.ru/obshhestvo/7639-tiraspolskijj-sud-udovletvoril-isk-mmk.html> Accessed August 23, 2011.

concerns about the effects of the crisis in the region.<sup>349</sup> Attendance was sparse – around sixty people – due to unseasonably cold temperatures. I arrived as flags were being unfurled and positions were assigned. During his speech Soin stressed that Proryv was well-prepared for the crisis, but that, practically speaking, there was not much they could do. Activists and participants milled around outside the Che Guevara School, forming two lines, while organizers negotiated with a policeman for traffic control along the route. At the front of the march was a yellow banner with black lettering that simply said “Anti-crisis March;” other banners included the standard yellow Proryv banners, two PMR flags, three Russian flags, and one Soviet flag.



**Fig 15.** Anti-crisis March in Tiraspol. Proryv’s headquarters visible in the background. Photo by author.

<sup>349</sup> В Тирасполе состоялся Антикризисный Марш! [In Tiraspol there was an Anti-Crisis March!] <http://www.tiras.ru/2008/12/27/v-tiraspole-sostojalsja-antikrizisnyjj.html> Accessed July 23, 2011.

The route of the march traversed some of the more important political and economic spaces in Tiraspol, beginning in the center near the Suvorov statue and continuing to the central market. The path from the Suvorov statue to the central market is a place where pensioners sell their possessions or homemade goods to supplement their pensions. No strangers to economic hardship, the peddlers barely acknowledged the marchers. The march continued past the Orthodox cathedral (financed by Sheriff) before turning onto the main street and onwards to the university. During the march slogans were shouted through a loudspeaker: “Work, pay, pensions – YES! Crisis – NO!” “Russia help Transnistria!” “Proryv is against the crisis!” Despite the fact residents could not stop talking about the crisis amongst themselves, there appeared to be little participation or even acknowledgement from bystanders. Those that engaged the spectacle had a blank stare on their faces. A promised speech at the end never materialized, perhaps because there was no crowd. At the university the organizers got into waiting cars and participants walked back; marchers were given printed material to distribute. Minutes later, as I engaged bystanders, most were unaware that any anti-crisis march had even occurred. Most appeared more concerned with going about their business.

Despite this lack of engagement with the public at large, the march was considered a symbolic success in the subsequent online press release, later reprinted in their newspaper. The press release quoted the leader of Proryv’s political party, who proclaimed:

... everywhere we encounter the anxiety and concern of the people about their fate and the future of the republic. Therefore, as a youth movement and party we cannot step aside, we boldly challenge the crisis. Our marches will be held in all cities and regions of Pridnestrove.<sup>350</sup>

Having witnessed the march, I found this suggestion that Proryv was expressing the concerns of the people to be as hollow as their bold challenge to the crisis through shouts and banners.

Subsequent anti-crisis marches were held across the PMR, with a regular cast of participants bused in from Tiraspol. The majority of the marchers were young students, individuals whose positions in life insulated them from the direct effects of the crisis. Unable to secure the active participation of residents in the different locations, Proryv activists themselves canvassed the PMR to gather support for their anti-crisis message. The geographic location changes, but the actors remain the same. Proryv merely took their slogans and marches across Transnistria, then creates press releases chronicling the wave of anti-crisis marches occurring across Transnistria. By organizing and setting the stage of these marches, they are spreading their brand, honing their ideological message, and ultimately creating a spectacle that positions the organization as a force for change.

This series of actions illustrates how Proryv spins an issue through their informational infrastructure. Building their brand required them to highlight periodically the gap between the economic pronouncements of the authorities and the existing precarious situation. While President Smirnov states that all of the conditions exist for the PMR to become a “little Switzerland,” residents find themselves in a precarious economic situation and give little credence to such pronouncements. Seeking to create newsworthy events, Proryv media sources chronicled the “growing wave of anti-crisis marches” in the region.<sup>351</sup>

The goals of the marches were both practical (directed toward local political constituencies) and symbolic (directed as they were toward the Russian state). Practically, the marches drew attention to the economic effects of the crisis and requested Russian financial

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<sup>350</sup> “In Tiraspol an Anti-Crisis march occurred” <http://www.tiras.ru/2008/12/27/v-tiraspole-sostojalsja-antikrizisnyjj.html> Accessed August 22, 2011.

<sup>351</sup> “Anti-crisis Marches cover all of Transnistria,” <http://www.tiras.ru/tema-dnja/7706-antikrizisnye-marshi-okhvatili-vse.html> Accessed August 22, 2011.  
“A Wave of Anti-crisis Marches in Transnistria Grows,” <http://www.tiras.ru/tema-dnja/7445-volna-antikrizisnykh-marshejj-v.html> Accessed August 22, 2011.



assistance for the region, which has more than 120,000 Russian citizens. Symbolically, the marches sought to rally local organizations and civil society about the unfolding “humanitarian crisis,” a crisis that would undoubtedly become monetized and subject to rents as aid and charity made its way from the Russia to the PMR. Proryv was aware that marches and slogans would not directly stimulate economic growth, though they hoped to force authorities to act quickly to blunt crisis’ impact. How they planned to do this was never explained. Even in the context of an economic crisis, Proryv’s attempts to force authorities to acknowledge the economic meltdown fell on deaf ears.

The idea that Proryv are the victims of an information blockade from the highest levels of bureaucracy remains a central tenet of their self-presentation. Not supported from above, Proryv must seek support from below.<sup>352</sup> One issue that remains to be clarified is the overall goal of the anti-crisis marches: were they part of a pre-election agitation campaign to increase Proryv’s political brand, an indirect challenge to the unofficial media blackout, or something else? While these marches are part of a branding campaign and simultaneously a response to a perceived blockade, above all they constituted a visible front in their ongoing information war.

### **Conclusion: Proryv in 2010**

When I returned to Tiraspol in September 2010 the court case against Proryv was in full swing. After local elections in March 2010, a local judge in Tiraspol claimed that an article posted on *Lenta PMR* about a contested local election between Proryv’s candidate and another candidate (the godchild of Tiraspol’s appointed mayor) had caused her significant physical and emotional distress. As is often in the post-Soviet world, the winner of local elections in Transnistria was the candidate that could command the most administrative resources,

*adminresurs*. Proryv's candidate in the local elections was favored to win this district. An unattributed article on *Lenta PMR* alluded to the price required, in this case, to receive a favorable judgment in a Tiraspol courtroom. This piece had upset the judge, and she immediately countersued and demanded one hundred thousand dollars for damaging her moral and physical health. She alleged that, due to the scandalous allegations and personal criticism against her that appeared in print, she had trouble sleeping and her health had deteriorated. It seemed as if this would be the end of Proryv's media empire, as the judgment sum was clearly meant to close their newspaper. Furthermore, the case implicated not only Proryv's print media, but their associated electronic media holdings, which raised the issue of jurisdiction, since *Lenta PMR* was hosted outside of the PMR and the news story in question lacked an author.<sup>353</sup> Furthermore, since the trial involved the family of the Tiraspol mayor (a close confidant of the president), Proryv was unable to find a lawyer to take their case: no attorney would touch it.

After some maneuvering, the trial was moved to the northern city of Grigoriopol after Proryv claimed that they could not receive a fair trial in Tiraspol. Unable to secure a lawyer, Soin told me that he "learned the legal codex in a single day" before heading off for the preliminary hearing in Grigoriopol. Because the financial burden was so large, the defendants (Soin and another editor, Roman Konoplev) demanded material proof that her mental and physical health had been degraded because of the criticism. The trial was adjourned for information gathering. By shifting the burden of proof, Proryv forced the plaintiff to prove exactly how and to what degree she had been upset by the criticism. The judge ruled that she must provide doctor's certificates and attestations proving she had been harmed.

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<sup>352</sup> Lest one forget that it was the voices of residents that forced them to form a political party in the first place.

<sup>353</sup> Tiras.ru is registered through a Russian domain name registration service but its servers are in Germany.

Months later, as I arrived in Tiraspol in September 2010, the trial was set to begin. As a “friend of Proryv,” I was invited to attend the trial as an independent international observer. The shift of venue left the trial in the hands of a young, relatively inexperienced female judge. As we gathered early one morning to drive together to court, the defendants seemed confident that Proryv would finally have their day in court. We had just passed the Tiraspol city limits when we received word that the trial was once again postponed. We later found out that the trial could not be held because “the judge needed to go to Chişinău.” Only in the PMR could a judge cancel a trial the morning of the session in order to travel to the capital of the country that had attempted to commit “genocide” against Transnistrians. Later as we drank tea and discussed the situation, the defendants wondered aloud how they would frame this latest bureaucratic move in the media. Like seasoned political technologists, they plotted their next move – should they return to the court to make a public spectacle, taking pictures of the empty courtroom? Or should they plot a different means of counter-attack, to better exploit the judge’s visible anxiety to their advantage?

They spoke about the absurdity of the situation, and of how this latest incident shows what little regard institutions hold for formal law in the PMR. The session in question was rescheduled for the next week, but that date came and went without notice. The plaintiff had not submitted the proper medical diagnoses. They speculated that she did not want to endanger her job and her standing with the court. Based upon the symptoms that she claimed (sleeplessness, anxiety, inability to concentrate, fear), if she had submitted medical attestations she would be in jeopardy of losing her position because if her illness became part of the public record it could be used against her. After all, who wants to be judged by someone not fully in control of his or her emotions? Proryv had trapped her into admitting that her symptoms were feigned, and that they were merely an excuse to muzzle their newspaper. Perhaps my presence as an independent,

international observer had scared the judge, or simply the fact that the defendants demanded that the accusations be supported by an objective source led the accuser to conclude that the court case was not worth risking one's job for, especially one as lucrative as a judgeship. The court case that initially seemed to spell the end of Proryv's media presence quietly disappeared without commotion.

Much had changed since my initial fieldwork ended. When I returned to the PMR in September 2010 the building that housed the Che Guevara High School of Political Leadership was in the process of becoming a shoe store. The school had relocated to the decrepit Hotel Aist a few hundred meters away (the move was ostensibly a cost-cutting measure). On September 14<sup>th</sup> Proryv signed a cooperation agreement with two local political parties, *Obnovlenie* (Renewal) and *Spravedlivaya Respublika* (Just Republic). Both of these parties are financed and controlled by Sheriff. The agreement concerned cooperation, collaboration, and partnership in upcoming national elections under the common heading "Together with Russia." While undoubtedly the agreement figures into pre-election strategizing (with parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2010), the leaders of each party took turns denying this in their speeches. *Obnovlenie*, Sheriff's party, is the richest and best-represented party in the PMR Supreme Soviet (parliament). The Just Republic party, also under control of Sheriff, is a clone of the Fair Russia party, a party that primarily exists in Russia as a toothless opposition to Putin's United Russia.<sup>354</sup> Speaking of the recently signed agreement, Dmitri Soin stressed how the agreement inaugurated a new period of deeds and not simply words.

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<sup>354</sup> The creation of Fair Russia in 2007 from the merger of *Rodina*, the Russian Party of Life, and the Russian Pensioners' Party was meant become a catch all socialist party that would bleed the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

The key elements in this agreement constitute a few things. First, of course, the common slogan "Together with Russia!" Today's signing is a logical continuation of the referendum results September 17, 2006, when 97% of the citizens who voted supported the policy of independence and entry into Russia. The second point - that we signed a contract about the parties' "deeds," because we already have a lot of words in Transnistria, and I would like to have more deeds. This is an important association, which together will create a new qualitative state of the political and social field. Our republic, now 20 years old, lives in the conditions of non-recognition, so I hope that our three parties will be able to make a decisive and significant contribution to the prosperity of our country.<sup>355</sup>

His word confirms the results of the most recent referendum and positions this alliance as the political form that will help the voice of the people be realized. The signing of this agreement was the logical culmination of Soin's branding efforts; he had built up a product that was now ready to be purchased in the political marketplace. In private, however, Proryv leaders used to complain about how they could not compete with well-financed parties that had easy access to the airwaves and could draw upon Sheriff's unlimited financial resources to buy the goodwill of the population. Now, it goes without saying, Proryv can draw upon the same sources as part of their new coalition. Proryv's activist methods – flash mobs, marches, print media, and culture jamming – have become newest additions to a well-financed political machine. No longer exclusively working with youth, Proryv can now concentrate on finding a niche for themselves in the grand *dramaturgia* of Transnistrian politics. The visible detachment between their slogans Proryv and the problems of the population are now even less apparent as they become part of a political machine that commands the support of the masses if only because they can offer more than slogans, given that Sheriff can offer them bread, butter, and other consumer goods.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> "Party of 'Real Deeds': For Russia and for Transnistria!" <http://tiras.ru/tema-dnja/20873-partii-realnykh-del-za-rossiju-i.html> Accessed August 22, 2011.

<sup>356</sup> Renewal and other Sheriff-sponsored parties are well-known for their generosity towards the electorate. A standard pre-election or holiday gift bag includes a kilogram or two of flour, rice, cooking oil, and sugar. For pensioners barely surviving, this few dollars worth of groceries buys loyalty.

From Proryv's humble beginnings as a group of politically active sociology students to its direct lineage to Modest Kolerov's now disbanded "Department for Interregional and Cultural Relations," Proryv has existed in a variety of forms: NGO, social movement, international revolutionary brand, pro-Russian political party, oppositional force in the PMR, and, most recently, part of an electoral bloc financed by local oligarchs. Unaffiliated observers told me that Proryv's alliance was the logical culmination of their activities in the region - they built up a brand, and they had symbolic capital that could now be sold. Some took this event as a sign that Proryv had "stopped playing games" and had gotten serious about entering politics. The former sociology professor, the Interpol-wanted fugitive, and former state security officer had cashed in Proryv's political capital and saddled up to its richer, PR-deprived rival.<sup>357</sup> Proryv's experience with PR and informational warfare becomes an asset to Sheriff's political holdings that largely function through less-refined methods like buying pensioners' votes with groceries and gift bags. As a political entity that defies easy definition, Proryv remains a symptom of *virtual politics* insofar as its primary function is largely dependent both upon who is financing it at the moment and what codes, models and informational flows it seeks to exploit. From the movement's initial origins as a movement designed to thwart any potential colored revolution to its current role in the PMR, Proryv's mercurial form is the product of human artifice and intellect. It, like many political projects in the post-Soviet world, was designed to captivate, profit from, and ultimately perpetuated the system that had a hand in its creation. As a movement that is connected to geopolitics (remember that it was Transnistria's strategic importance for Russia that enables Proryv's initial startup financing) and the functional role it plays in the region. Having elaborated a set of state institutions, state-builders and elites now needed to add parties and democratic

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<sup>357</sup> The Renewal Party's young reformer (and current PMR President) Yevgheny Shevchuk, had resigned his post as speaker of the PMR Supreme Soviet in early 2010 because of a dispute with the President about constitutional

elements to the polity, knowing that without choices (or the illusion of choice) their corruption and nepotism would be all the more visible. Hence from within system itself there arose a need for a novel, image-drive political brand – Proryv emerged in response to this. Its leader rebranded himself a political entrepreneur with a nascent media empire actively creating fronts in the ongoing information war. Proryv’s utilization of new media, public relations, and political technology offered a means of entering politics as well as profiting socially and materially. Despite its peculiar origins and its singularity as a intra-Transnistrian phenomenon, above all the state and those interested in its continued existence gain, since above all Proryv supports PMR statehood irrespective of who is occupying the its institutions.

## CONCLUSION: ON PHANTOM STATES AND AMBIGUITY

December 2011 presidential elections in the PMR were the most competitive ever. Having presided over the PMR since for more than two decades ago, the incumbent President Igor Smirnov had lost the crucial support of Moscow. Given the prominent symbolic, material, and geopolitical presence of the Russian Federation both as patron, sponsor, and peacemaker in the region, the loss of Russia's favor should not be underestimated. Both local and Russian media were inundated with news reports detailing the illicit gains of his immediate family and chronicling their alleged embezzlement of Russian aid. The content of the news reports themselves did not surprise residents — most passively accept the corruption of the ruling elite. Talk on the street and in Internet forums centered on what will happen if Smirnov decided not give up the reins of the state. Though initially in the run-up to elections there was no question of Smirnov losing the election — his command of administrative resources appeared to make his victory a foregone conclusion, yet he ended up losing in the first round. His vulnerable position was a result of an unsettling malaise within the PMR. Some spoke openly of a return of bloodshed and of the fragility of the state, while others simply registered their disgust with the current state of affairs, most notably a dismal economy and employment prospects. Previously, elections were a time of affirming and performing the PMR's sovereignty. This crisis of authority sparked a crisis at a deeper symbolic level insofar as President Smirnov was the public face of the PMR. Given the uncertainty over Russia's continued support of the region and its leadership, in the run up to elections some residents began to ponder about a future in which the PMR might not achieve independence and recognition. Yet what happens should the PMR's tenuous existence as a *de facto* polity end?



I have tried, in the preceding pages, to illustrate how non-recognition modifies our understandings of sovereignty. Both in terms of the practice of international relations and as a theoretical concept, sovereignty is not quite what it seems in the PMR. As a state-like entity that has existed in defiance of Moldova's *de jure* sovereignty, the PMR remains an unacknowledged presence capable of generating a lingering uncertainty that penetrates far beyond its borders. At the conceptual level, the PMR shows just how little sovereignty is dependent upon international recognition of external validation. Beyond challenging the link between territories and recognition, the PMR exposes the shortcomings of a world that discourages ambiguity.

In a recent New York Times op-ed, Daniel Byman and Charles King spoke of a renewed need to engage with the 21<sup>st</sup> century's "phantom states" — these curious entities that, while not quite states, "stoke wars, foster crime, and make weak states even weaker."<sup>358</sup> These phantom states run the gamut from unrecognized entities that are models of effective governance (Somaliland) to others that strain relations between regional powers (Northern Cyprus). Some are accepted as states (Taiwan), while others (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) are recognized only by their primary sponsor, Russia, and smaller nations such as Nauru and Tuvalu that sold the right to recognize others as sovereign. The leaders and elites of "phantom states" champion national self-determination while the states in which they reside (or which claim jurisdiction over their territory) stress the need for stability. In the face of these incompatible principles, phantom states themselves point out the uncomfortable precedents and double standards that allow for recognition of some states and deny it to others. Byman and King end their editorial with a call to engage these states not as outlaws but as partners. Their ideal model of a phantom state that

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<sup>358</sup> Daniel L. Byman and Charles King, "The Phantom Menace." *The New York Times*. August 15, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/16/opinion/the-phantom-menace.html> Accessed October 13, 2011.

enjoys international legitimacy is Taiwan, a legitimate country that is unrecognized and not independent.<sup>359</sup>

The insistence of territorial integrity by international actors like the United States and, to a lesser extent, the EU, leaves “phantom states” internationally isolated. Often they conduct the bulk of their trade and diplomacy through a single state (witness the outsized role of Russia in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, and of Turkey in Northern Cyprus). Such isolation creates the conditions for these phantom states to become the illicit outposts that the world fears. The refusal to acknowledge these states in their own terms creates the conditions for the realization of their potential as rogues. As a whole there is a tendency to dismiss the internal workings of these states, yet they remain vital to understanding many of the established and now largely invisible processes that underpin any political authority.

By creatively seizing on its own ambiguity that stretches back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the PMR is now a political entity that remains parasitic upon the international system it exists in defiance of. For some, it is a jurisdictional zone of exception where complex financial schemes can be realized. For others, the PMR is situated on a geopolitical fault line that conveys practical and symbolic importance on the region. This importance translates into financial gain, political support, and a general lack of inertia to solidify its ill-defined status. For others the PMR remains a rightful successor to the Soviet Union, a place that will remain *rodina* despite any criticism. Those who fall into the last category have no use for normative concepts like corruption and democracy that are seen as a means of delegitimizing the PMR as a state. As I have shown in a variety of contexts, Transnistrian sovereignty is the result of symbolic, material, and representational processes that operate at distinct historical moments. The periodic re-

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<sup>359</sup> Above all, for the authors Taiwan shows the power of creative ambiguity insofar as it has prospered economically but has largely avoided the touchy political issues.

affirmations and performances of sovereignty, whether they take the form of photographs of the 1992 war, voting in a referenda, or waving a banner at a rally each offer individuals a means of, at least temporarily, assuaging the PMR's liminality-at-large. For some this liminality is profitable, while for others it simply constitutes the terms of their existence as current political subjects of a non-state and former political subjects of a superpower.

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, liminality-at-large and its performative sovereignty is generative of a host of institutions, narratives, rents, and subject positions. The region's liminality-at-large offered a new context for the now-devalued Soviet knowledge and categories to become the basis for a political project. Gradually, PMR elites would profitably merged with the uncertain terrain of capitalism. The fact that this performative sovereignty remains a work in progress, not finalized or anchored in any institution, leads to its re-staging in a different contexts. The ethnographic and historical examples described in this dissertation will undoubtedly be supplemented by new practices and forms of knowledge in response to changing political, economic, and social demands. The absence of a coherent narrative in the post-Soviet period has heightened the stakes of these performances.

Non-recognition as phenomenon is not limited to the post-Soviet world — it is a fundamental aspect of our globalized world. As creative ambiguity proliferates internationally, from Kosovo to Abkhazia to Somaliland to Taiwan, it is useful to think about the particular material and symbolic processes occurring as a result of non-recognition. Transnistria and the other *de facto* states former Soviet Union offer an example of how non-recognition, existing within the gaping void left by the Soviet collapse, may form the basis for a community and create a sense of belonging. The legacies of the Soviet Union, both institutional and practical, will remain a defining feature in its successor states well into the future. And while the map of

the world may no longer reflect the ideological front of the Cold War, it behooves us as scholars to look at the productivity of non-recognition both in terms of its internal content as well as its role in the wider interconnected world.

Though located in a peripheral region of a peripheral country, Transnistria embodies many of the underlying political and economic practices that underpin our existence as political subjects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a political entity with all of the institutional and symbolic aspects of statehood save international recognition, Transnistria offers a unique site for reconceptualizing political and legal authority from the murky underside of an increasingly globalized world. Despite its improvisatory, performative nature, itself a result of its political liminality, Transnistria elucidates the increasingly contingent nature of liberal-democratic sovereignty in an time in which popular alienation rises in proportion to the rise of finance capital, opaque state-corporate alliances, and increasingly militarized borders. In Transnistria, the melding of these processes is relatively transparent insofar they visibly undergird the PMR's existence as a political entity. Elsewhere, in the West, with its own democratic traditions measured not in decades but centuries, elites have gone to even greater lengths to mask the "performative" dimension of sovereignty. The contradictory demands of the present, however, have once again thrust performances and the people into the political fray.

When one looks at Transnistria through the normative lens of democracy and capitalism as practiced by the West, one cannot help but notice how abnormal the region and its processes look to us, yet how strikingly normal these same processes are for residents. While it is all too easy to look at Transnistria and the wider post-Soviet world with a smug sense of superiority, the irony is that they are not different from us — the 2008 financial crisis only reinforced the idea

that the interests of capital will remain ascendant. This sense of superiority overshadows any heuristic import a place like Transnistria might convey.

And while one can dismiss PMR referenda as a stage-managed tool of elites seeking a political mandate for statehood, referenda have as of late only increased in importance in both Europe and the United States. Latvia recently held a referendum on adding Russian as a second official language in 2012. Oddly enough, the referendum was not brought about by Lithuanian nationalists but by an alliance of ethnic Russians who sought to blunt the eventual assimilation of their children. It is somewhat ironic that those on the periphery of the nation ended up realizing the conditions to affirm it. The referendum failed by a large margin, due in part to the fact that Russian speakers in Latvia (as well as in Estonia and Lithuania) are not regarded as citizens with full rights and privileges by the state (cf. Feldman 2005). Given that these referenda seem to increasingly touch upon such fundamental questions about the relationship to political authority to the people, it is worth exploring the circumstances surrounding them as well as the symbolic and performative roles they fulfill for elites, citizens, and the nation itself.

Returning to Greece, when Prime Minister Papandreou called for a referendum in November 2011 on whether or not to accept EU and IMF conditions for a bailout, many saw it as a ploy to rally lawmakers for support. Given that this would have been Greece's first referendum that would not address a change in the form of government, the referendum ever so briefly (it was cancelled three days after it was called for) pulled back the elaborately cultivated facade of accepted norms and forms of political practice. The turmoil caused referendum and its quick disappearance exit showed to extent to which financial capital has become *the* ascendant force of our time. Exactly how corporate and financial interests dictate to the state remains situational, for while international financial organizations and supranational entities like the EU determine the

exact contours of austerity throughout much of Europe, in a place like Transnistria economic entities similarly play a hidden yet omnipotent role in determining the forms taken by politics. One thing remains certain in both – the people will be called forth and they will fulfill a role in this great drama. That is perhaps the curse of popular sovereignty: by its nature it is bound to at least formally acknowledge an increasingly weak linkage of a state's legitimacy with the will or consent of its people. It behooves us as scholars we must interrogate popular sovereignty in all its forms, particularly those ones that seem overly contrived, artificial, or shallow. By mapping the components of democracy and sovereignty in an overdetermined yet unsettled place like Transnistria, we can gain an insight into elements of our own democratic system (performative, ritual, masking) that we have long since accepted and subsequently forgotten.

**Appendix A:** Assorted photos from *The White Book of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic*



*Антифашистская  
демонстрация  
приднестровцев*

*Antifascist Demonstration of Transnistrians. The sign reads “Nationalism does not lead to prosperity of peoples.”*



*Жители Приднестровья  
радостно встречают  
миротворцев*

**56**

*Residents of Transnistria joyfully meet peacekeepers*



*Изнасилованная и убитая  
Таня Бондарец*

*Изнасилованная и убитая  
Ольга Дорофеева*



*Убитый житель  
Бендер Николай  
Коцофан*

*Убитый в подвале своего дома  
Андрей Дорофеев*



(translations from upper left, counterclockwise)

*Raped and murdered,  
Tanya Bondarets*

*Raped and murdered,  
Olga Dorofeyeva*

*Murdered resident of Bendery,  
Nikolai Kotsofan*

*Murdered in the basement of his home,  
Andrei Dorofeyev*





*Замученный в плену 5 июля 1992 года сотрудник МГБ ПМР Александр Поляков. Выколоты глаза, выбиты зубы, тело изрезано ножками, на спине паяльной лампой выжжена буква «V»*

**25**

*Tortured in captivity on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1992, officer of the PMR MGB (Ministry of State Security) Aleksandr Polykov. His eyes gouged out, teeth broken, his body scarred with knife wounds, the letter "V" was burned on his back with a blowtorch*

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